

NBA > The playoffs > Lottery luck > Our awards

Sporting News

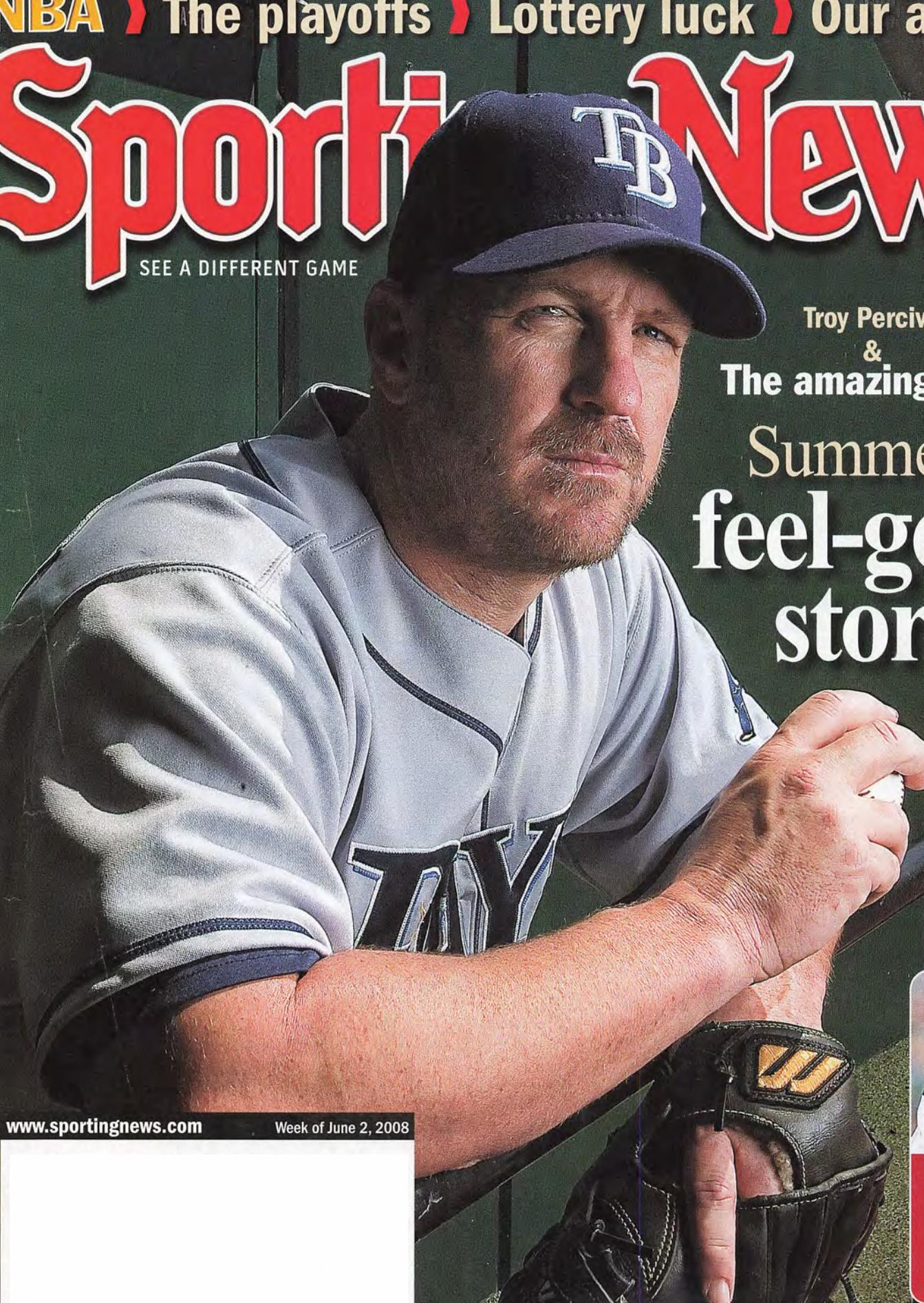
SEE A DIFFERENT GAME

Troy Percival

&

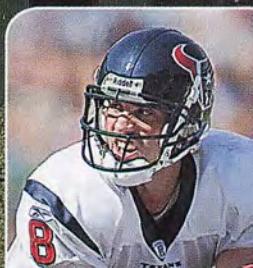
The amazing Rays

Summer's
feel-good
story



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Week of June 2, 2008



Is MATT
SCHAUB
looking over
his shoulder?



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THIS WEEK

> NBA PLAYOFFS

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The sun on the horizon can mean different things. For the Lakers, it's the dawn of a new day. For the Spurs, it's a not so beautiful sunset.
By Steve Greenberg

> NBA DRAFT LOTTERY

18 Running with the Bulls

Draft mystery No. 1, solved: Chicago gets the top pick. Now on to draft mystery No. 2: Which can't-miss player looks better in red?
By Mike DeCourcy

> NHL PLAYOFFS

20 How Swede it is!

The Red Wings bring speed, toughness and experience to the Stanley Cup finals. And they play with a Scandinavian accent. By Ted Kulfan

COVER STORY

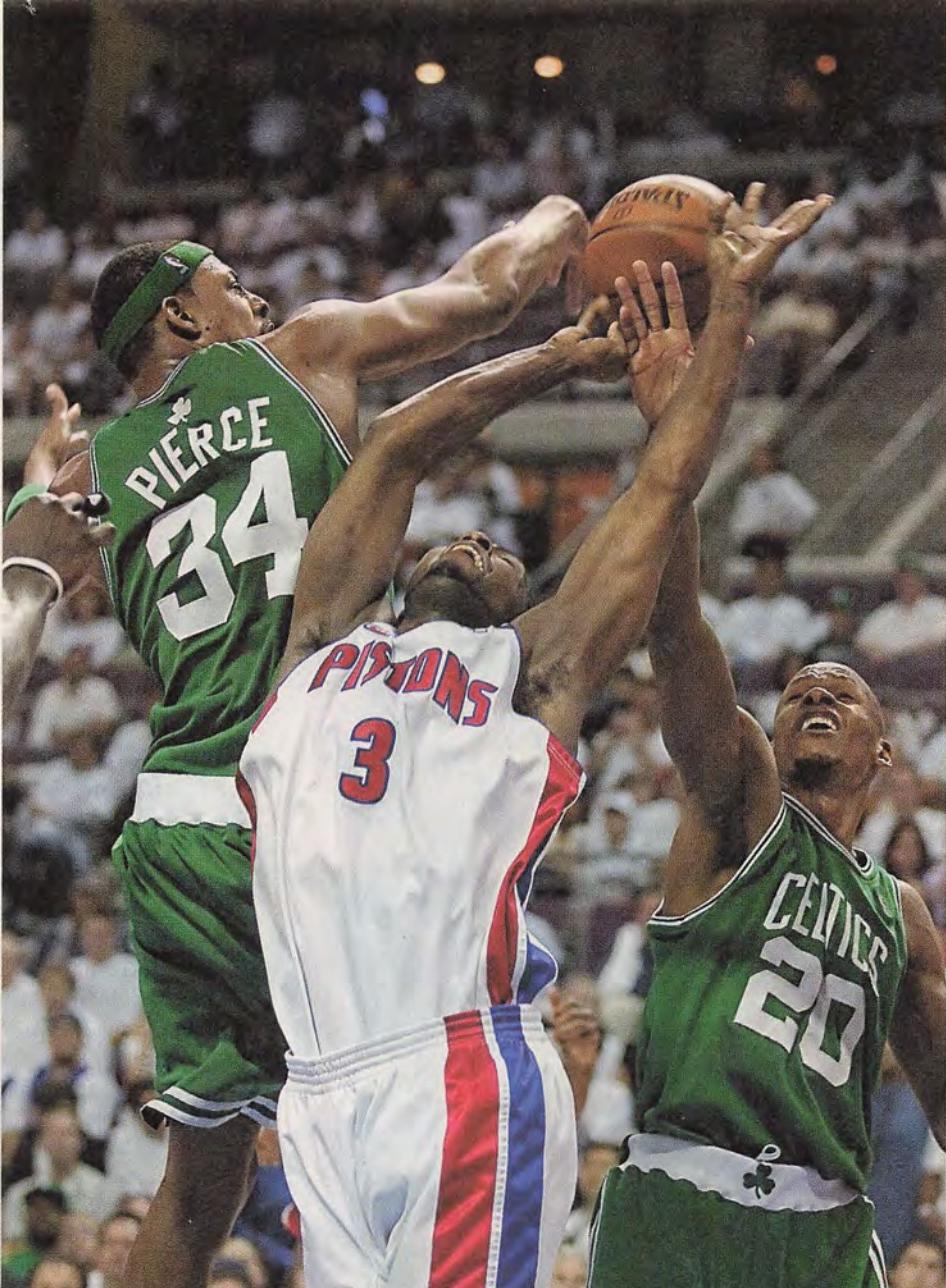
> BASEBALL

24 Era of enlightenment

Not only is Rays veteran closer Troy Percival providing valuable leadership, he's also pitching lights-out for what is becoming a devil of a team.
By Ryan Fagan

KNOW IT ALL

- 2 **To Know List** Jason Taylor and Bill Parcells: It takes two to tango.
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really can win
on the road.

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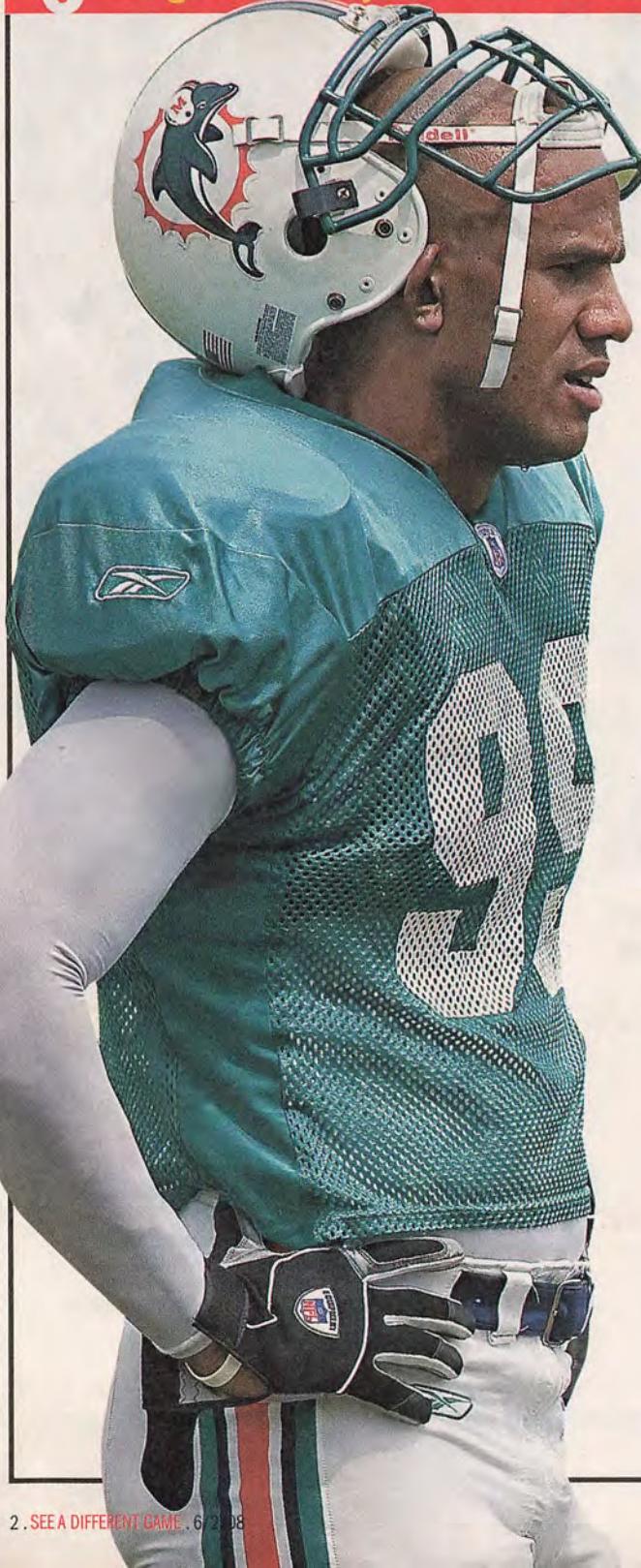
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KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL

TO KNOW LIST

6 things to make you an **INSTANT EXPERT** this week



1

THE MAIN EVENT

It takes two to tango

Now dancing the tango—Jason Taylor and his partner, Bill Parcells.

Notice how they don't move rhythmically. How could they when they are strangers 3,000 miles apart?

Taylor, the Miami Dolphins' best player and the NFL's man of the year for the 2007 season, spent the spring in Los Angeles, training for *Dancing with the Stars*. Parcells, the Dolphins' VP of football operations, fumed in Miami over Taylor's absence from the team's offseason workouts.

There's no physical contact. Several weeks ago, Taylor returned to Miami to visit his teammates. When he dropped by Parcells' office, Parcells gave him a cursory glance, said nary a word, then turned back to the tape he was watching.

Ouch. They really botched that last step. When *Dancing with the Stars* ended last week—Taylor finished second in the competition to figure skater Kristi Yamaguchi—Taylor announced he was taking a red-eye flight to New York, where he would appear on *Good Morning America* and *Live With Regis and Kelly*. Then, he planned to return to L.A.

Back in Miami, coach Tony Sparano told reporters Taylor would not be attending any of the Dolphins' minicamps, the remainder of their organized training activities or training camp. Out of sight, out of mind.

My, what an ugly dance this is. Let's go to the judges and get their comments.

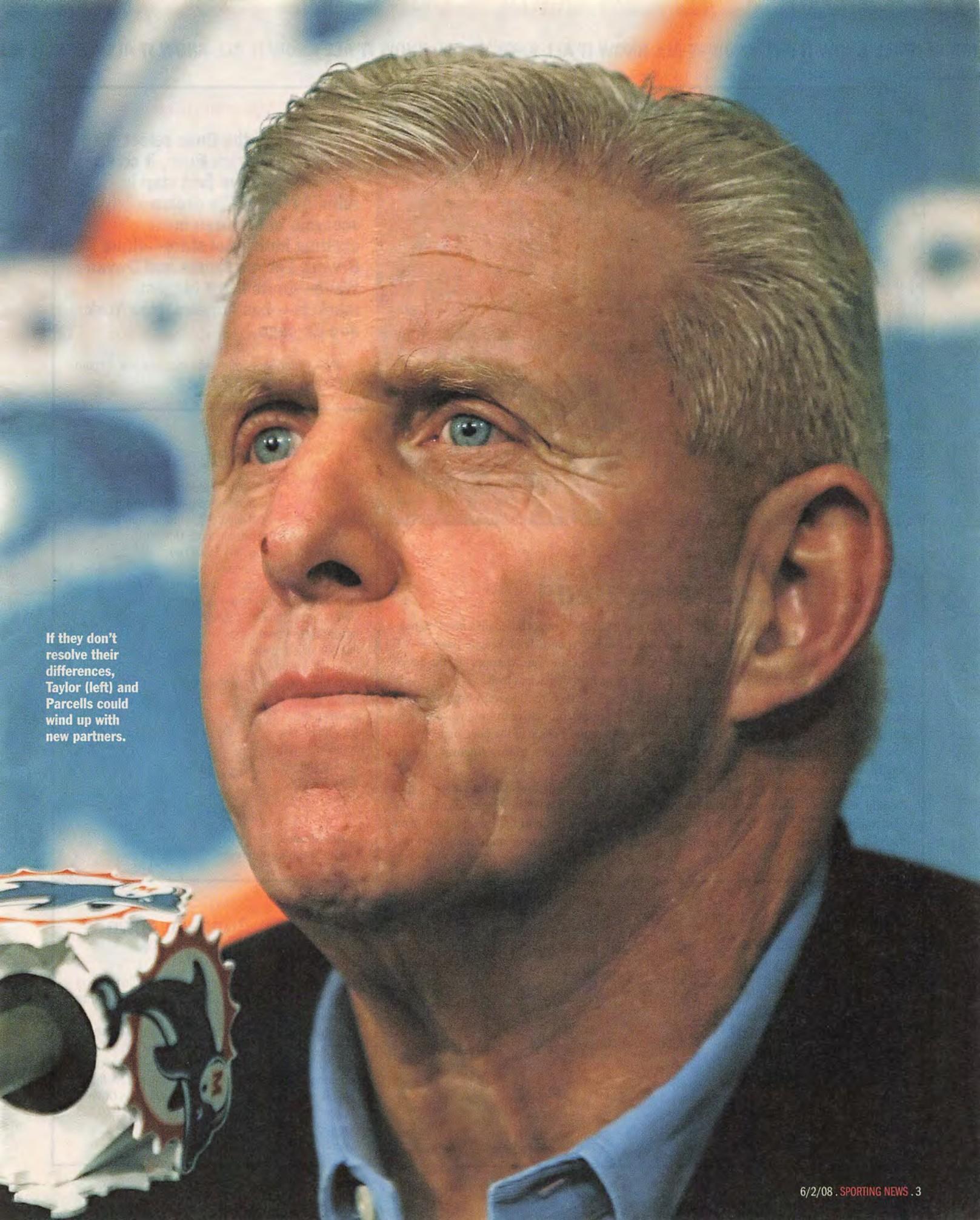
Carrie Ann Inaba: "Whew. Let me first cool down and catch my breath. . . . Jason, not many people would be brave enough to step out of their comfort zones, risk failing in a strange environment and have the success you did. But you did it. With your charisma and heart-melting good looks, I see you crossing over seamlessly into the world of entertainment one day. My only advice now would be to get back to football."

Bruno Tonioli: "What a heartless, callous, spiteful performance, Bill! To ignore Jason when he is standing in the doorway of your office, hoping to have a heart-to-heart, is another example of the Turbulent Tuna! You are the boss. You call the shots. You're not going to allow anyone, even a six-time Pro Bowl player, to break through your crusty exterior."

Head judge Len Goodman: "Well, for me, this is an example of a juvenile rift between two self-absorbed blokes that seems destined to leave an ugly stain on a Dolphins team that is trying to erase the memories of an abominable 1-15 season last year. And that's a pity."

Jason and Bill, you still have time to fix this mess and move forward. The votes of the Dolphins' fans won't save you. You'll have to do it yourselves.

—Dennis Dillon



If they don't resolve their differences, Taylor (left) and Parcells could wind up with new partners.

KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL



IN THE SPOTLIGHT: MLB INSTANT REPLAY

2

A warming trend

Last November, in discussing the 25-5 vote of baseball general managers in favor of limited use of instant replay, Major League Baseball VP Jimmie Lee Solomon said that movement toward changes like this tends to be "glacierlike." But, if Al Gore has taught us anything, it's that glaciers melt.

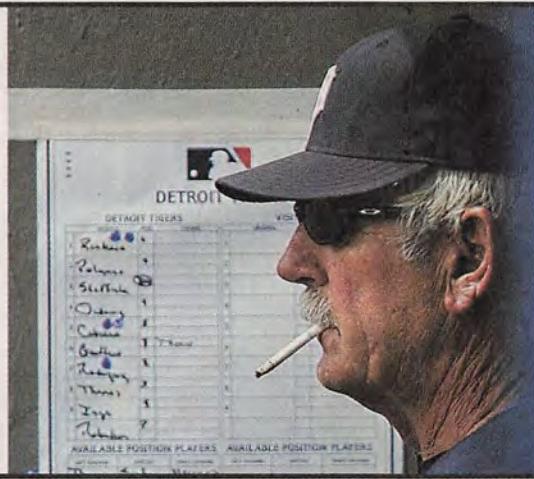
A series of botched plays—should-have-been homers by the Cubs' Geovany Soto, the Yankees' Alex Rodriguez and the Mets' Carlos Delgado—shook confidence in umpires' ability to tell whether a ball has actually gone over the fence, especially at some of the newfangled parks around baseball. For the first time, real consideration is being given to implementing instant replay, at least when it comes to disputed home run calls.

Commissioner Bud Selig has long opposed instant replay in any form, and suggestions that it could be in place by this year's postseason are premature. But last week, Selig told XM Radio's Charley Steiner, "I am very seriously reviewing this entire matter and then we'll take it from there." Doesn't sound like much. But only recently has Selig begun giving replay "serious" review. The melt is on. —Sean Devaney

IT BEARS
REPEATING

**'They want
me to run
to the mound.
I smoke three packs
a day and they want
me to run back and
forth to the mound?'**

—Tigers manager Jim Leyland
to the Detroit News on baseball's
plans to speed up the game



YOU HEARD IT HERE

4

'If the Bulls select Derrick Rose, it could be the first step in fulfilling the NBA's dream scenario of its three most exciting individual stars—Kobe Bryant, LeBron James and Dwyane Wade—in its three biggest markets—Los Angeles, New York and Chicago.'

—NBA writer Sam Smith, who explains how it could all go down at sportingnews.com

MOVIES

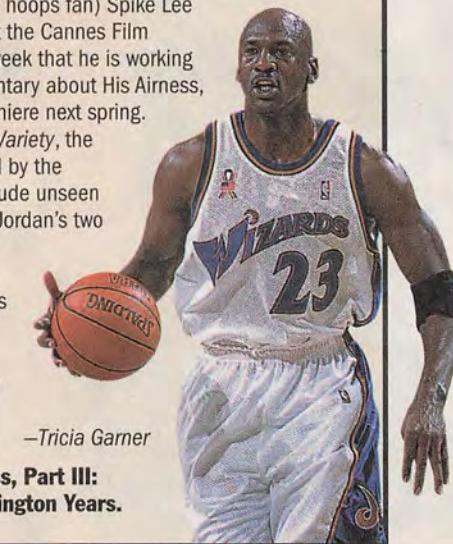
5

A hot ticket

Michael Jordan is making another comeback—only this time, it will be in a movie theater instead of on a basketball court. Director (and die-hard hoops fan) Spike Lee announced at the Cannes Film Festival last week that he is working on a documentary about His Airness, slated to premiere next spring. According to *Variety*, the film—financed by the NBA—will include unseen footage from Jordan's two seasons with the Wizards. Let's hope this comeback goes better than that one did.

—Tricia Garner

**His Airness, Part III:
The Washington Years.**



TELEVISION

6

Bring your own popcorn

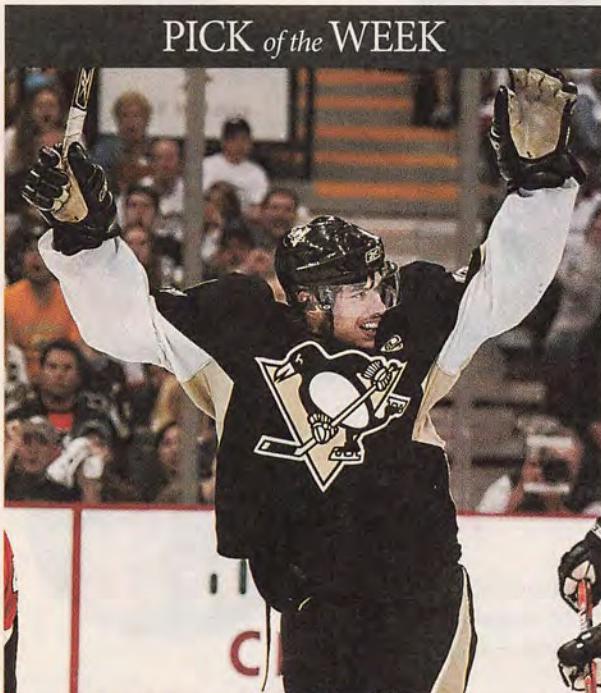
Experience sports, history and entertainment from the comfort of your very own recliner with HBO's Summer Film Festival, which kicks off Tuesday at 7 p.m. ET. Each week during the summer, the network will roll out one of its sports documentaries, beginning with *Barbaro* and concluding with—just in time for college football season—*Michigan vs. Ohio State: The Rivalry*. Other featured films will include the stories of the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team, the UCLA college basketball dynasty and the 1968 Detroit Tigers. —T.G.

KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL

ON DECK

All times Eastern

>>>>> The week ahead in sports



If Crosby has his way, his first trip to the Stanley Cup finals will be a memorable one.

SAT 31

The NHL playoffs are nerve-racking. Fluke goals, crazy bounces, goalies standing on their heads. If your blood pressure can stand it, take in **Game 4 of the Stanley Cup finals** (8 p.m., NBC). If the Red Wings contain Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin, they'll win it all. Of course, if Crosby and Malkin were containable, the Penguins would not be where they are.

SAT 31 It's unusual for a World Series to feature two teams that have never won a championship. It happened in 1980, when the long-suffering **Phillies beat the Royals in a six-game Fall Classic** (6 p.m., ESPN Classic). Phillies fans, relive the dream—and delight in daydreams of Ryan Howard, Chase Utley and Jimmy Rollins playing this October. Royals fans, well, you can delight in the fact your team isn't quite so terrible this year.

SUN 1 **NASCAR racing at Dover** (1:30 p.m., FOX). When fans debate the best tracks, Dover rarely comes up. That's a shame. Dover is a high-banked 1-mile concrete track where the racing is always intense. Put it this way: The winner's trophy wouldn't look like a monster if the event were boring. Prediction: Dale Earnhardt Jr. will pick up his first points race win of the season.

WED 4 **Rays at Red Sox** (7 p.m., ESPN). Two irrefutable signs this is not a normal baseball season: 1. The Rays will play on national television; 2. They will play against the team they have battled for first place all season. (*How have the Rays come so far so fast?* Check out page 24.) —Matt Crossman

BOB HILLE'S STARTING 5

1 **NBA playoffs.** It's a dream stretch of heavy hitters going head to head: Kobe vs. Duncan, Rip vs. K.G., Steve Wynn vs. Barkley.

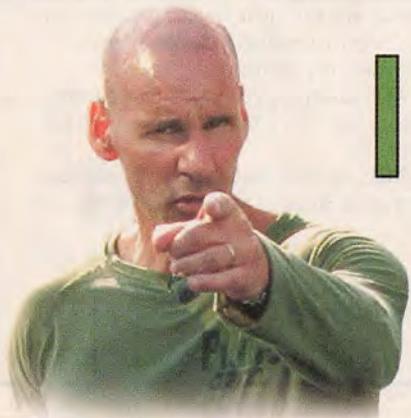
2 **The NFL.** Did you see that league security interviewed a convicted steroids dealer and he provided names of players he sold to? Congress is so outraged that it's going to subpoena six more major leaguers.

3 **Stanley Cup finals.** Just my luck. It's the best matchup in years and—boom!—my freakin' plasma gets fried by Don Cherry in high-def.

4 **Jason Taylor.** I've got to be honest, I'm more than a little surprised that his differences with the Dolphins are irreconcilable. I thought they might just put him on the Physically Unable to Fox Trot list first.

5 **Summer.** The long Memorial Day weekend was the traditional start, which means a change in the forecast: hot wind outside the White Sox manager's office, too.

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From one cancer survivor to another, I say congrats to you, **Jon Lester**. You have done a special thing.

—Yankees3Fan7 via SportingNews.com

■ While I was reading the Main Event in the May 19 issue about Chris Chelios' longevity, I noticed one thing in common among three of the players listed. Kevin Willis (Michigan State), Morten Andersen (Michigan State) and Gordie Howe (Detroit Red Wings) all have ties to Michigan. It must be the water. —B.J. Rycus, Okemos, Mich.

■ Winning the draft lottery is a dream come true for Bulls fans. Please take Derrick Rose! Look at what Chris Paul and Deron Williams have done for the Hornets and the Jazz. You have to take the point guard. —10in01 via SportingNews.com

■ A Jordanesque legacy (SN, May 19)? Michael

Jordan had character, honor, class and integrity—all qualities sorely lacking in the arrogant, self-absorbed prima donna Kobe Bryant. —Boomer-19gens via e-mail

■ Kobe Bryant will never ever be as good as Michael Jordan. That's like comparing hamburger to steak. —SPORTS GENIUS via SportingNews.com

■ I sincerely hope Mark Cuban does not buy the Cubs (SN, May 19). He would ruin the franchise from a baseball standpoint, not to mention with his crazy behavior. We saw what he did to the Mavericks this year with the Jason Kidd trade. —Jeremiah Knight, Greenville, N.C.

POLLING PLACE

Who should go No. 1 in the NBA draft?

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RADIO★STAR

Real talk from a fan on Sporting News Radio

'Jason Taylor was great on *Dancing With the Stars*, and it was great of him to be on it. He only has a few years of football left, and when he's finally done he'll be set because of the skills and talent he showed on TV.' —Jeff in Charlotte on The Arnie Spanier Show

GMC WE ARE PROFESSIONAL GRADE.

Posted by blackbandit20

I used to be a Timberwolves fan. When I lived in the Twin Cities, the Spurs would regularly come to town and paste the T-wolves. I detested the goody-two-shoes David Robinson, who I always saw playing dirty under the hoop and whining to the refs. Add Mr. No Emotion, Tim Duncan, and the fact that the media seemed to dote on the Spurs as a team that "did it the right way" and you have a team I grew to strongly dislike.

My other least favorite teams:



MLB: Chicago White Sox. There are two people who sum up my loathing of this team: A.J. Pierzynski and Ozzie Guillen, whose histrionics rub me the wrong way.

NFL: Green Bay Packers. I'm a die-hard Vikings fan ... do I really need to explain any further?

NHL: Colorado Avalanche. A yapping team that wants so badly to be the Red Wings' rival.

To see more of blackbandit20's blog, and many others, visit **SPORTINGBLOGS** at sportingnews.com.

KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL

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Inside ... Inside the NBA

It's before the show at TNT's *Inside the NBA*.

The catering staff asks Charles Barkley which salad he wants.

"What's the salad have in it?"

"Tomatoes and onions, Chuck."

"Onions? What if I have to kiss Ernie tonight?"

Ernie Johnson laughs.

Across the room, Kenny Smith rants: "They're running that same stupid offense again," referring to the one-on-four Cavaliers attack featuring LeBron James charging into a throng of Celtics defenders.

Barkley sits aghast: "That same stupid f— offense. Call timeout, coach. CALL TIMEOUT! CALL TIMEOUT! Get that boy a forward and he'll have FIFTY A GAME."

If you were sitting there, you would get the feeling *Inside the NBA* doesn't ever really stop. You'd think they just turn the cameras on and film what's already happening. You would be right.

Charles often blows through commercial breaks, talking as the camera fades out, leaving the viewer midsentence.

Tim Kiely—"T.K." to everyone—is the show's producer, and he wants a certain degree of chaos. Chaos means something's happening. "I love how on *The McLaughlin Group* they'd take an argument clear through to the break. That means you're having a discussion," he says.

How do you solve the problem of cutting Charles or Kenny off if they're running long, then?

"Easy. We just go to break."

Barkley knows this and goes anyway: "If T.K. tells me 30 seconds, I'm gonna start talking. I like messing with him. It means I like him."

Improv and speed rule here. Alex Houvouras mocks up the "Gone Fishin'" photos and doctored video clips for the show. Like most things on the show, the idea came out of nowhere: Bored one day, he started rigging photos of Charles' and Kenny's heads on random pictures. Now the



The good times roll even when the camera's not on Ernie (left), Kenny and Charles.

photos are an essential running gag.

Ideas can come from anywhere and anyone. On a suggestion from Smith, the crew spoofed the Kobe Bryant spot where the MVP jumps over a car in his new line of Nikes. "Kenny had no idea what we were going to do with it from there. We shot it in the parking lot before the show. It took two hours from start to finish," Houvouras says.

The video featured Smith being digitally creamed by a speeding car. On replay, the car was doctored to look like Johnson was the driver. Barkley was in tears, and the bit made the rounds on YouTube the next week.

The studio guys never have any idea what they're going to see from the graphics people upstairs. "I want the conversation and reactions to be genuine. They will never know what's coming," T.K. says.

There's Kenny Smith's brand-new baby boy. Barkley, who had been lounging in a chair, gets up and decides it's time to flex his parenting skills. The ladies in the viewing room cock their heads like a troop of troubled meerkats, but alarm soon changes to bemusement. "Babies never cry with the Chuckster. Ne-ver," Barkley says. The baby is tiny anyway, but curled up on Barkley's stomach, it looks infinitesimal. "I KNOW HOW TO DO THIS." He continues to hold forth at full volume. The baby snoozes on his belly. "NOTICE HOW I AM CRADLING THE BACK OF THE HEAD."

Sure, there was some initial panic, but the audience—in this case, a baby—seems perfectly content with what's going on. A perfect metaphor for the show. —Spencer Hall

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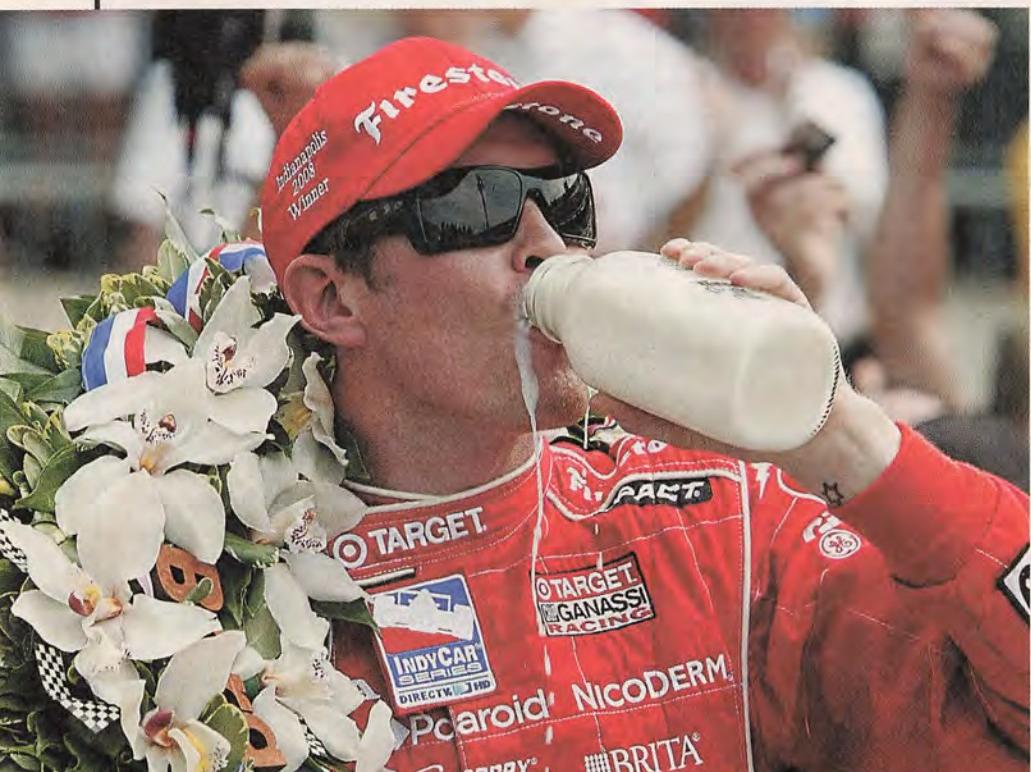
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KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL

It's lonely at the top

Most of the buzz around a rejuvenated Indy 500 came before the race. In the end, New Zealand's Scott Dixon saw to that all by himself.



Got title? Dixon tasted 500 victory and, thus, Indy's traditional celebratory beverage.

As Scott Dixon drove the last 75 miles of Sunday's Indianapolis 500, he was just a touch of his radio away from conversations with his team owner, crew chief, strategist and a host of other crew members. Heck, he probably could've buzzed his wife to praise the pancakes she had made that morning. He was surrounded by approximately 250,000 fans, many of them screaming his name. Millions in the United States and around the world, including his native New Zealand, were watching him.

Yet he felt like "the loneliest guy in the world."

The win, the biggest in the IndyCar Series, was his to take. As he drove, all alone, all he could think was, "Don't screw this up." Corner after corner he threw his car at 220 mph, and corner after corner he wondered if now was when his luck would run out, and corner after

corner it didn't, and corner after corner nobody could catch him.

And thus ended the most anticipated Indy 500 in years, if not ever. It might be premature to declare the IndyCar Series alive and well, but at least it's off life support. At least I hope that's true because I want to hear more from driver Ryan Hunter-Reay. He complained that fellow rookie Hideki Mutoh continually blocked him. When Hunter-Reay finally completed the pass, "I wanted to throw a No. 1 sign."

Both hands on the wheel, Ryan!

Hunter-Reay narrowly missed the wall, by his count, a half-dozen times and finished sixth—the best among a talented and deep field of rookies, 11 in all. After the race, he talked with David Letterman, one of his team owners. Said Hunter-Reay: "He just said, 'Five spots from being on my show.'"

Or maybe Hunter-Reay is looking to add

writer to his list of responsibilities: "Really, that's what I was thinking he would say."

Letterman wasn't the only big name to make news. Graham Rahal, son of 1986 winner Bobby, crashed early and finished last. On a pit stop under the subsequent caution, A.J. Foyt IV, grandson of four-time winner A.J. Foyt, was doused with fire retardant as spilled fuel burned around him. Marco Andretti, son of Michael and grandson of 1969 winner Mario, finished third but was blamed for causing the crash of teammate Tony Kanaan, who has led each of the seven Indy 500s he has entered but has never won.

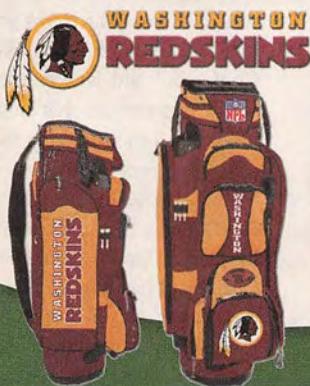
The series heads this weekend to Milwaukee after a month of positive news. Abundant anecdotes affirmed the massiveness of this Indy 500. Breathless helicopter pilots reported unprecedented unending traffic. The lines to get in started in Chicago, Cincinnati, Terre Haute and Louisville (approximately). The speedway sent out quotes from the celebrities in attendance, and actor Ian Ziering affirmed what everyone else was thinking: "I see even more fans here than last year. That must be due to open-wheel racing finally merging together."

Unfortunately, too much of that merging was of the car-with-wall variety. The unification of IndyCar and Champ Car is expected to improve the quality of drivers, cars and racing. For now, not so much—not with a third of the drivers rookies, several of whom hit the wall or spun for no discernible reason. Two drivers lost control under caution. And it wasn't just the rookies. Even veteran drivers struggled to make passes.

Especially Danica Patrick, who couldn't get out of seventh place. Her day ended in a pit road accident with Ryan Briscoe. After she climbed from her car, she walked briskly down pit road, determined to give Briscoe a piece of her mind and perhaps a slap upside the head. He sat in his car, where his team worked to get him back on the track. Whether he knew a 5-foot-2, 100-pound fellow driver was coming to confront him isn't clear. Patrick had nearly convened their meeting when a track security man headed her off pit road. And thus ended Patrick's chance to tell Briscoe that he's No. 1.—Matt Crossman



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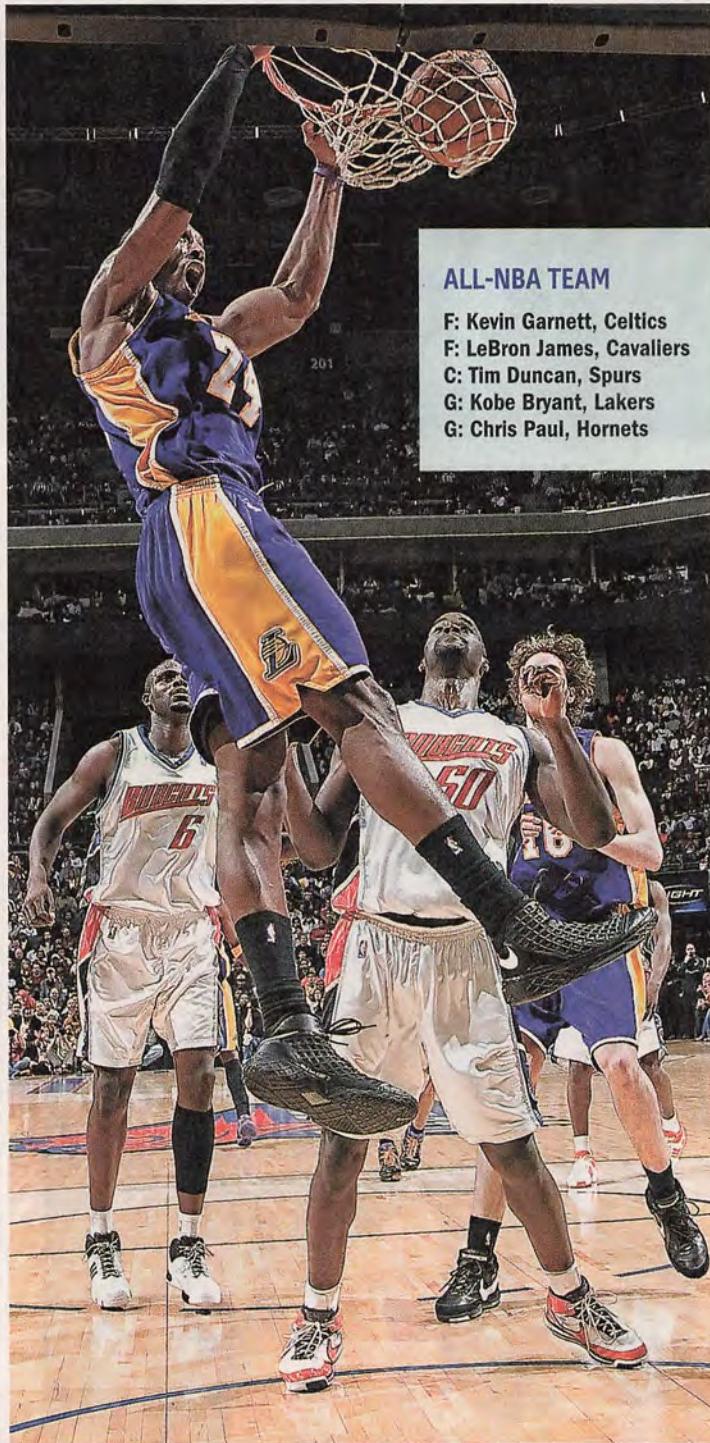
PLAYER OF THE YEAR

Kobe Bryant, Lakers

Media members voting for the league's MVP award weren't the only ones impressed by a kinder, more trusting Bryant. So were the majority of the 26 league execs who turned in their ballot for SPORTING NEWS' awards (we had four slackers). Bryant, 29, received 14 votes, double the total received by Hornets point guard Chris Paul. Though a newfound trust in his teammates has been cited as a key to Bryant's big season, his averages were worthy as well: 28.3 points, 6.3 rebounds and 5.4 assists.

Numbers game: Bryant's 53-point game against the Grizzlies was the league's best this season but equaled just the eighth-highest scoring performance of his career.

Rave review: "He's the best player in our league today. He's been the best player in our league for four or five years. So well-respected. What he did for that team and what he's continued to do throughout the playoffs ... he is the MVP in this league." —Cavaliers forward LeBron James



ALL-NBA TEAM

- F: Kevin Garnett, Celtics
- F: LeBron James, Cavaliers
- C: Tim Duncan, Spurs
- G: Kobe Bryant, Lakers
- G: Chris Paul, Hornets



COACH OF THE YEAR

Byron Scott, Hornets

The obvious reason Scott is taking home his first coach of the year award is his team's 56-26 regular-season record, which was good for the No. 2 seed in the tough Western Conference and far exceeded pre-season expectations that didn't even have the Hornets making the playoffs. What's *not* as obvious—except to those close to the Hornets—is Scott's ability to communicate with his players. Under Scott's guidance, Chris Paul has emerged as one of the game's top five players and Tyson Chandler has developed into one of the league's best defense-minded centers. "In my mind, I have a special relationship with every player on this team," Scott says. "I get along with all of these guys, but they understand that when the game starts, or when practice starts, 'He's coach.'" In voting by 24 head coaches, Scott got 10 votes to six for runner-up Doc Rivers of the Celtics.

Numbers game: Scott's teams have won four division titles in his eight seasons as a head coach.

Rave review: "Byron has done the best job of keeping his team the most consistent in a very tough Western Conference. He is most deserving." —Heat president Pat Riley

KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL



ROOKIE OF THE YEAR

Durant, Sonics

Expecting a just-turned 19-year-old to become the franchise cornerstone before he has played a single NBA game is asking a lot. But Durant answered the challenge and then some. He became the first rookie in five seasons to average more than 20 points, and he led his team in scoring, minutes, steals and blocked shots. In the last two weeks of the season, he hit last-minute shots to help the Sonics to victories over two Western Conference playoff contenders. Durant garnered 20 of 26 votes to beat Hawks big man Al Horford (four) and become the first Sonics player to win the award.

Numbers game: What rookie wall? Durant improved as the season went on, enjoying his two best months in March and April, when he averaged 22.6 points on 50.0 percent shooting.

Rave review: "If he did anything wrong, at times he made it look too easy." —Sonics coach P.J. Carlesimo



EXECUTIVE OF THE YEAR

Danny Ainge, Celtics

When the Celtics finished with the league's second-worst record last season, then slid to fifth in the draft lottery, Ainge did not panic. First, the Celtics general manager packaged the No. 5 pick into a deal for Ray Allen. That, in turn, led to the acquisition of Kevin Garnett in an unprecedented 7-for-1 trade. Presto—the Celtics went from worst to first in the East. Ainge also brought in key supporting players such as James Posey and Eddie House to give the team a proven bench. When Ainge saw a need for more depth late in the season, he coaxed P.J. Brown and Sam Cassell into signing. Ainge—the first Celtic to win the award since Red Auerbach in 1979-80—received 18 of the 47 votes cast by league executives to edge Lakers general manager Mitch Kupchak (14 votes) and Hornets G.M. Jeff Bower (12).

Numbers game: The Celtics' 42-game improvement was the biggest turnaround in league history.

Rave review: "He orchestrated a stunning and record-setting turnaround of a struggling team with two great trades and various other roster acquisitions." —*Raptors president Brian Colangelo*

Text by Stan McNeal

Sporting News

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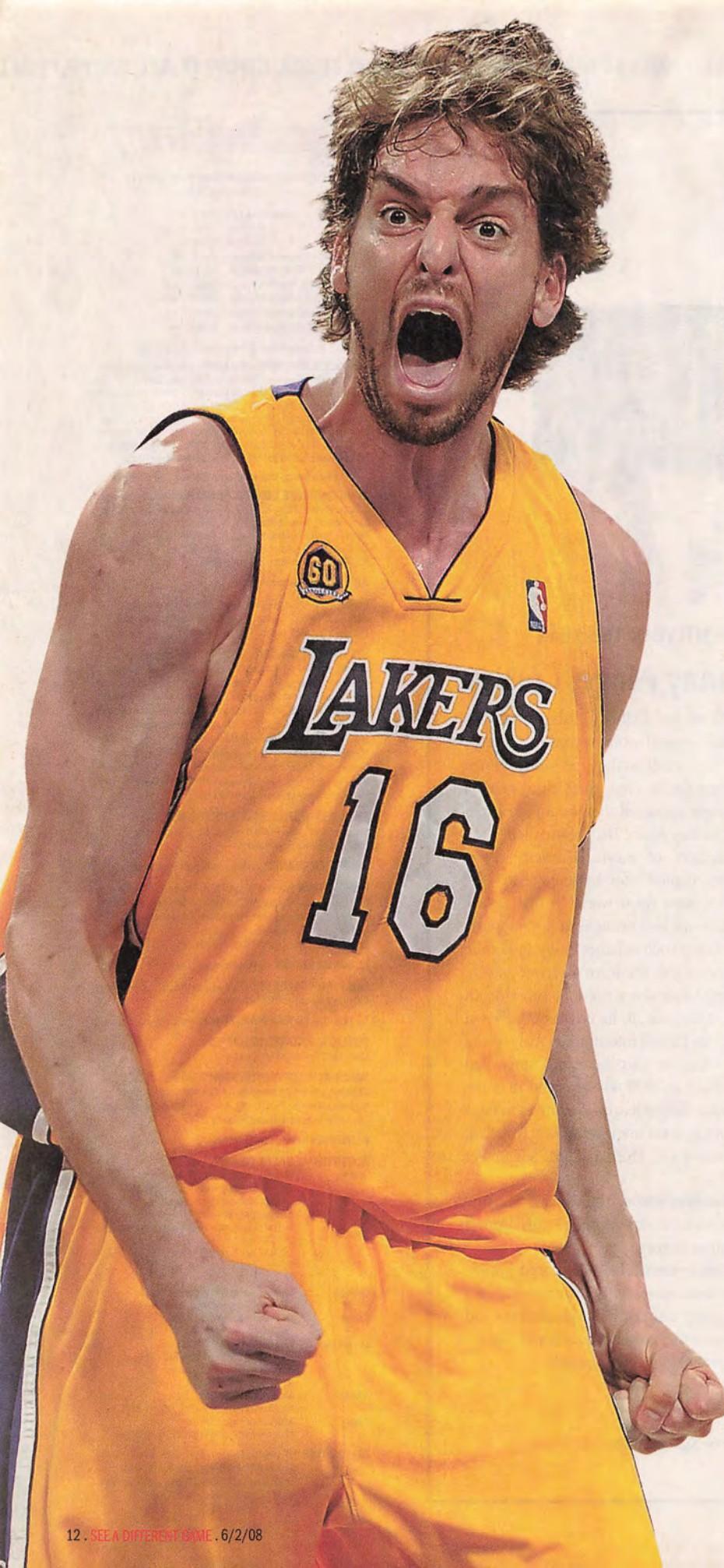
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NBA PLAYOFFS

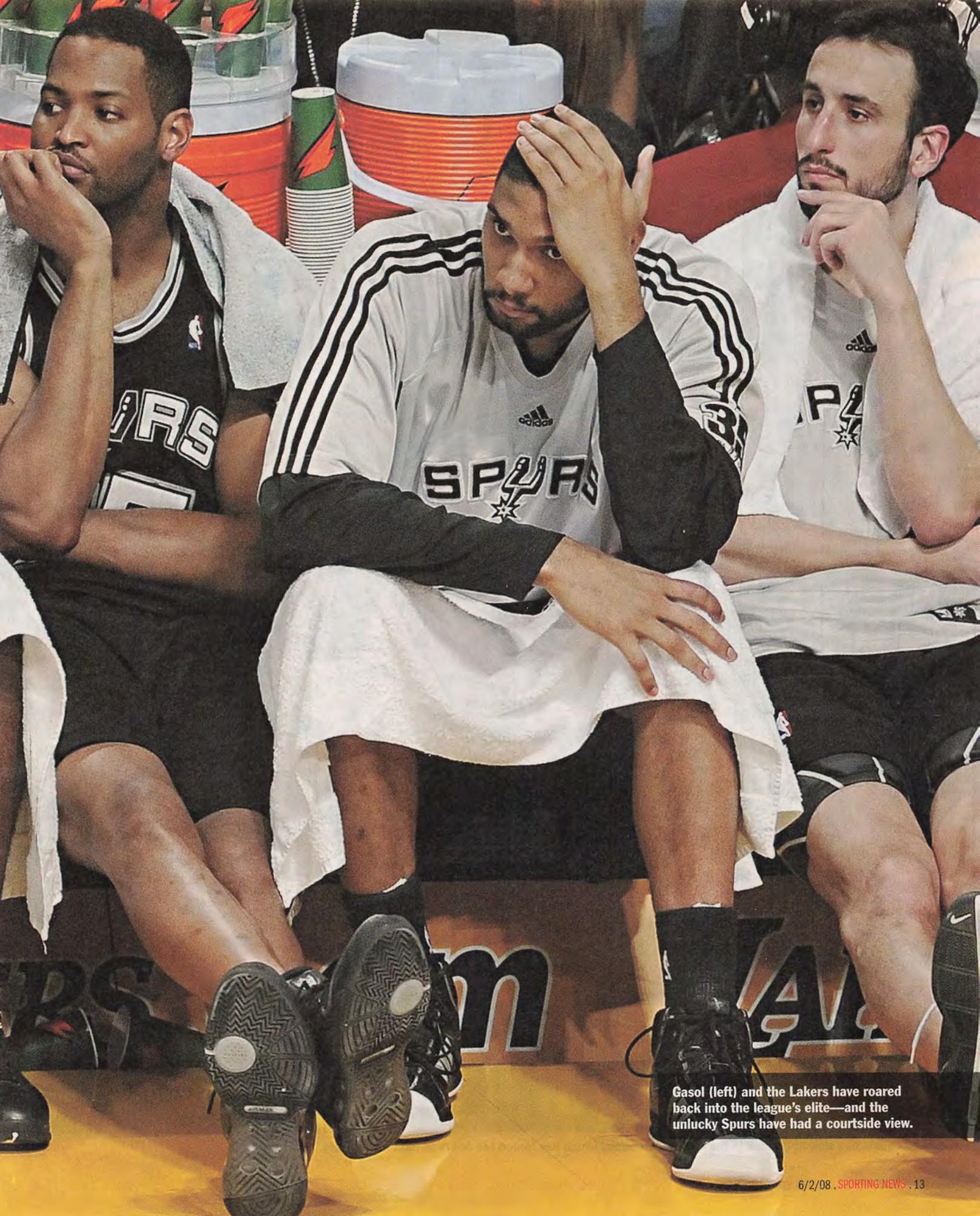
A TURN OF FATE

The sun on the horizon
can mean different things.

For the Lakers,
it's a promising new day.

For the Spurs?
An inevitable sunset.

By Steve Greenberg



Gasol (left) and the Lakers have roared back into the league's elite—and the unlucky Spurs have had a courtside view.



A left ankle has slowed Ginobili in the conference finals, which has forced the Spurs to limit his minutes.

All our yesterdays have lighted fools, wrote the poet, *the way to dusty death*. And so it should come as no surprise, and certainly no tragedy, if the San Antonio Spurs—brave and brilliant—at last succumb, stagger and wheeze toward the end of the line. It happens to the best of them, too.

But what to make of their inevitable conquerors? It is in our nature to aggrandize a changing of the guard—in sports, to crave it—and as we see the Los Angeles Lakers preying upon the Spurs' sudden and palpable vulnerability, the temptation is to herald the arrival of the NBA's next great team. Perhaps even its next dynasty.

A dangerous thing, temptation.

What the hell. You only live once, right?

There were some awful nights last week for the Spurs, who entered Game 4 of the Western Conference finals down, 2-1. Triumphant in the second-round clincher on Monday in New Orleans, they boarded their team jet tired but confident, their bags already packed for L.A. But mechanical problems grounded the Boeing 727, forcing the Spurs to stretch out as best they could and sleep right there on the runway.

Then, of course, came the nightmarish second half of Wednesday's Game 1, during which the Spurs gave up a 20-point lead and lost. Back at their Santa Monica seaside hotel, Manu Ginobili, feeling the pain of a tender ankle and blaming his poor shooting for the loss, couldn't sleep. Gregg Popovich, seeking fermented solace in the company of his assistant coaches, tasted only bitterness. "We ordered Flowers Chardonnay and I forgot what was the Pinot, but it didn't matter because they were out of both of them," he says. "(At least) we had wine on the plane."

It got so much worse in Friday's Game 2, an utterly humiliating affair that ended in a 30-point defeat.

But the worm had almost completely turned on the defending champions—in hindsight, we should have seen it clearly—the day before. In Santa Monica, the Spurs sat idle, their second consecutive off-day without practicing. In El Segundo, the Lakers got after it, their full-on practice culminating in a nasty five-on-five scrimmage including seven players who would get on the court in Game 2.

While Ginobili, Tim Duncan, Tony Parker and an aging Spurs supporting cast licked their wounds, the Lakers' Ronny Turiaf went nose to nose with Chris Mihm; both dropped angry f-bombs. Jordan Farmar, who scored a career playoff-high 14 points in Game 2, picked up a loose ball in the corner, tore down the baseline and took a hard foul from D.J. Mbenga. Luke Walton and Turiaf traded shoves. Sasha Vujacic, whose manic defense frustrated Ginobili in both games

in L.A., ran from end to end like an All-Star.

On one end of the court, assistant Jim Clemons bellowed at all of them to stay focused. At the other, assistant Kurt Rambis allowed a series of muggings to persist. With the score tied, 7-7, in a game played by ones, coach Phil Jackson rose from his throne, ambled onto the court and shouted: "Harder!"

The challengers thirsted for the chance to go up 2-0 in the franchise's biggest postseason series since 2004. The champions sat and wilted.

The following night, after the Spurs had given up the fight by sitting their three All-Stars nearly all of the fourth quarter, Popovich admitted: "We knew it would catch up to us this game. We thought our last game was our best chance to get something here."

Rested? No. Just weary.

The worm turned for the Lakers back in the fall, shortly after Kobe Bryant foolishly went public with stubborn claims that he wanted to be traded. In fact, Bryant's ego was wrestling with reality—and losing. After years of resisting Jackson's wishes that he fully surrender himself to the team's cause, Bryant was lurching toward acquiescence.

What you see in Bryant today—smiles, laughter and a never-before-felt ease with his teammates—is the result of the player's maturity and the persistence of his old coach, a force of personality and strength whose greatness should never again be questioned.

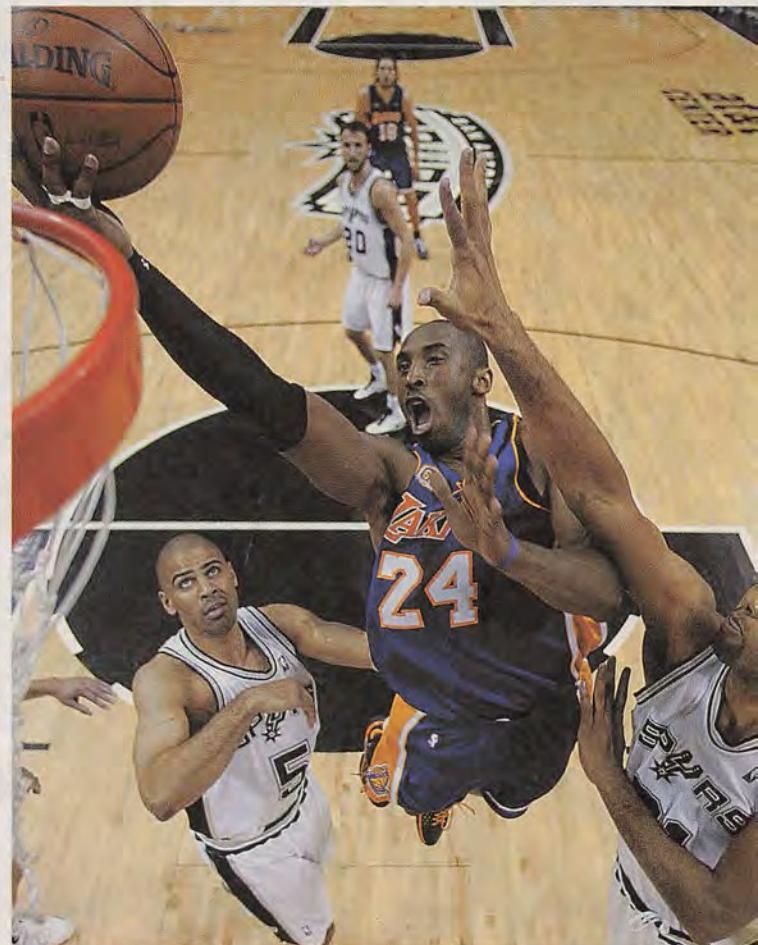
Yes, the 62-year-old Jackson has benefited from coaching superstars. But his legacy ought not be about championships won; he has changed the course of the league—twice—by persuading Michael Jordan and now Bryant simply to trust their teammates. The *twice* is a leap of faith: Because Bryant believes in Lamar Odom, Pau Gasol and the rest of the Lakers, who are young enough to withstand the league's rigorous postseason schedule, the best player alive is in line to reap championship rewards. This year and beyond.

"You can draw up X's and O's all day," says a

member of the Lakers staff, "but, at the end of the day, they aren't X's and O's. They're people. Kobe shares the ball, and all of the sudden they see themselves differently. They realize they matter and that they can make a difference on both ends of the court.

"Kobe isn't a better player this year; he's just smarter. He finally listened to what we've been telling him. Is he happier? Yeah, he's happier—because we're winning."

The team's four most important pieces—Bryant, Gasol, Odom and Andrew Bynum (who will not play this postseason due to injury)—all are under

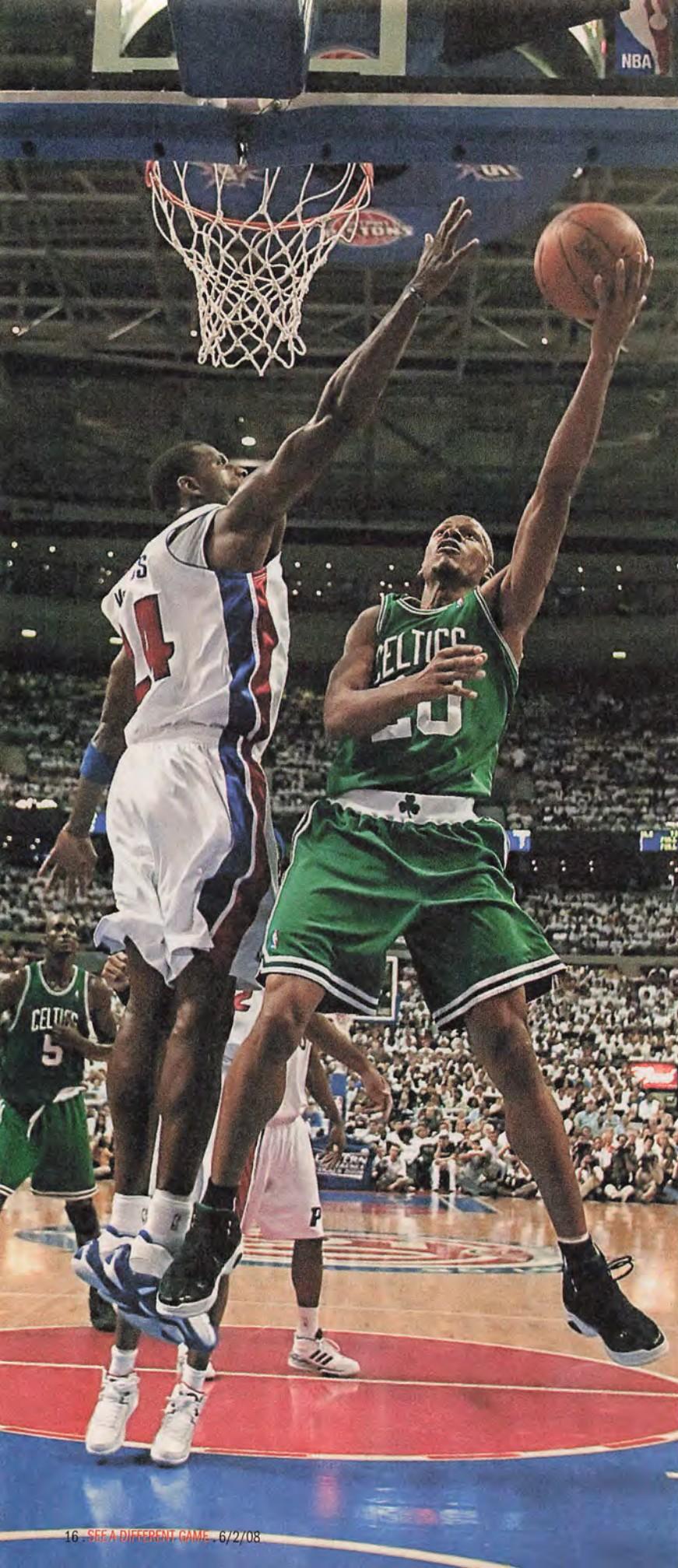


Bryant won his first MVP award this season, but he's not a better player—he just trusts his teammates more.

30. And, for a refreshing change in Lakerland, all are eager to remain in purple and gold. On the heels of the Spurs' three championships in five years, the Lakers are now the favorites this season and undoubtedly will be among the favorites for years to come.

Meanwhile, their performance in the West finals? It is full of sound and fury, signifying everything—a changing of the guard, to be sure, and quite likely a dynasty in the making. Or so we are tempted to believe.

SN



Meanwhile, in the East ...

... the changing of the guard hasn't been quite as cut-and-dried.

In fact, through the first three games of the conference finals, both the Celtics and Pistons looked old at times. Both teams looked impatient. On the other hand, both teams also looked confident. Both teams looked like they could slug it out with the best in the West.

In Game 3, the Celtics came roaring out of the gate, attacking the basket and pressuring the host Pistons into a dismal shooting night. They had the energy. They had the passion. "We came out aggressive early," Celtics forward Kevin Garnett says. "We took shots when we had them. Defensively, we were connected, we all talked. We were aggressive on both ends. That's how you've got to play against this team."

They found the drive to win that had been lacking as they had skidded to an 0-6 road record through the first two rounds of the playoffs. They finally played like the group that reeled off an NBA-best 66 regular-season wins and a league-high 31 road victories.

"Boston needs to get their confidence back somehow on the road," an Eastern Conference scout said before Game 3, "and it only takes one win to do it."

The players and coaches said that confidence wasn't a problem, that they believed they could win on the road in the playoffs, just as they had in the regular season. Still, believing you can win and actually winning are different things. Finally, on their seventh chance, they got the job done. And in doing so, they silenced—at least momentarily—the doubters who had all but conceded the East to the Pistons.

Unlike these Celtics, who were downright miserable last year before the additions of Garnett, Ray Allen, James Posey and others, the Pistons are used to this situation. This is their sixth consecutive trip to the Eastern Conference finals with essentially the same unit. So confidence is not a problem. "I don't like (falling behind in the series)," point guard Chauncey Billups says. "But for whatever reason, we've done things like this a lot of times. It's who we've been. We always find a way to work ourselves out of these kind of situations."

Billups, though, needs to find a way to be effective for longer stretches of time. He's battling a hamstring injury and was virtually invisible during Game 3. Rookie Rodney Stuckey has played well behind Billups, but if the Pistons have to rely on Stuckey to lift them past the Celtics, they're going home. Billups is the key to the Pistons' offense. His ability to come hard off screens and shoot, attack the basket or find the open man can be almost impossible to defend.

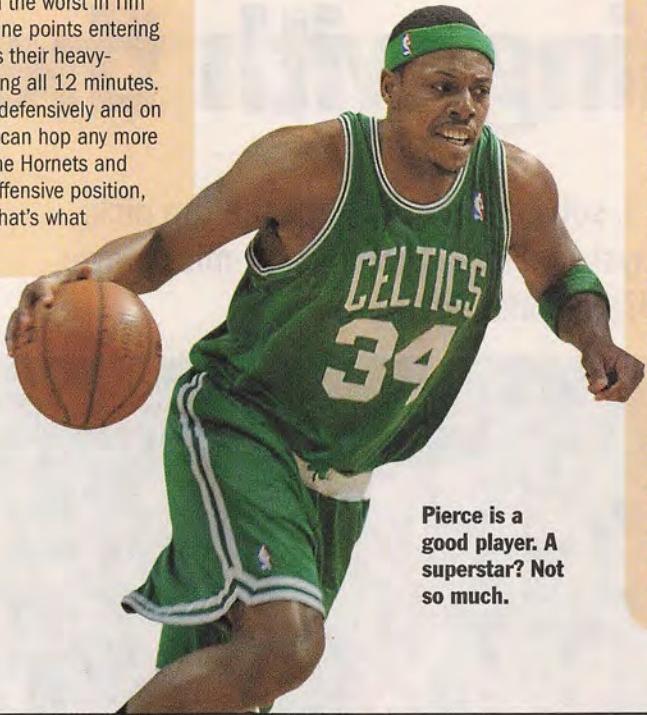
If Billups plays his healthy best, the Pistons stand a puncher's chance. If he doesn't, well, go ahead and crown the Celtics kings of the East. —Ryan Fagan

**Allen and the
Celtics won't
go home
without a
fight.**

Playoff 3-pointers

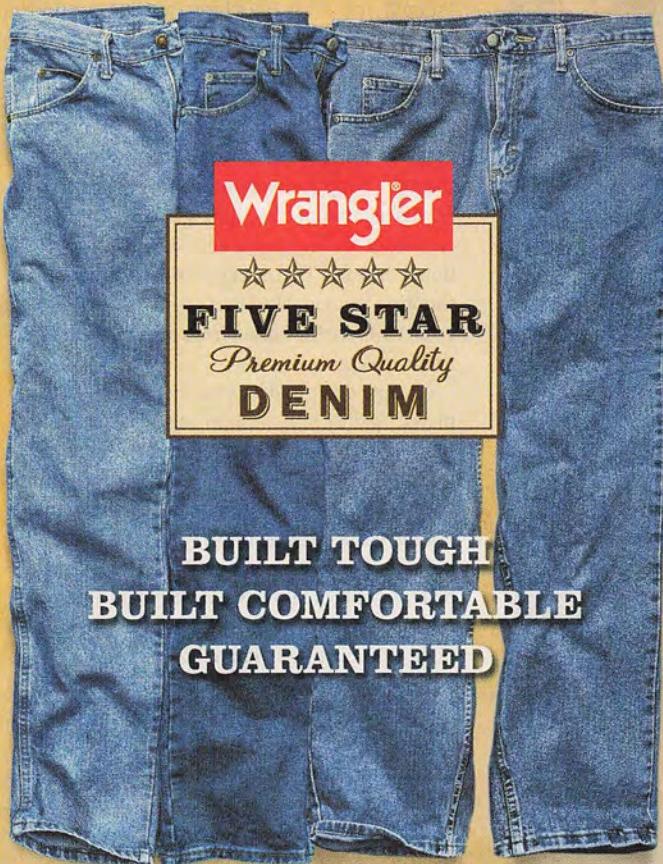
1 The third quarter of Game 2 may have been the worst in Tim Duncan's playoff life. The Spurs trailed by nine points entering the period—then were outscored by eight as their heavy-legged leader attempted one field goal despite playing all 12 minutes. Duncan was awesome in Game 1 and unstoppable defensively and on the boards in Game 3, but you have to wonder if he can hop any more planes without leaving his A game behind. Against the Hornets and then the Lakers, Duncan often didn't fight hard for offensive position, and he clearly lacked confidence in his jump shot. That's what happens when a big guy gets tired.

2 Phil Jackson had to be ticked off at Pau Gasol after Game 3. Jackson was very pointed in his criticism of his center after Game 2, saying, "Every shot he (took) was short. He was shooting weenie shots, I call them—weenying it up there instead of shooting the ball like he meant it." Then Gasol pulled the string on a bunch of close-in jumpers in Game 3, and TNT's Doug Collins noted that Gasol was "taking it soft" on drives to the basket. Time for Gasol to man up.

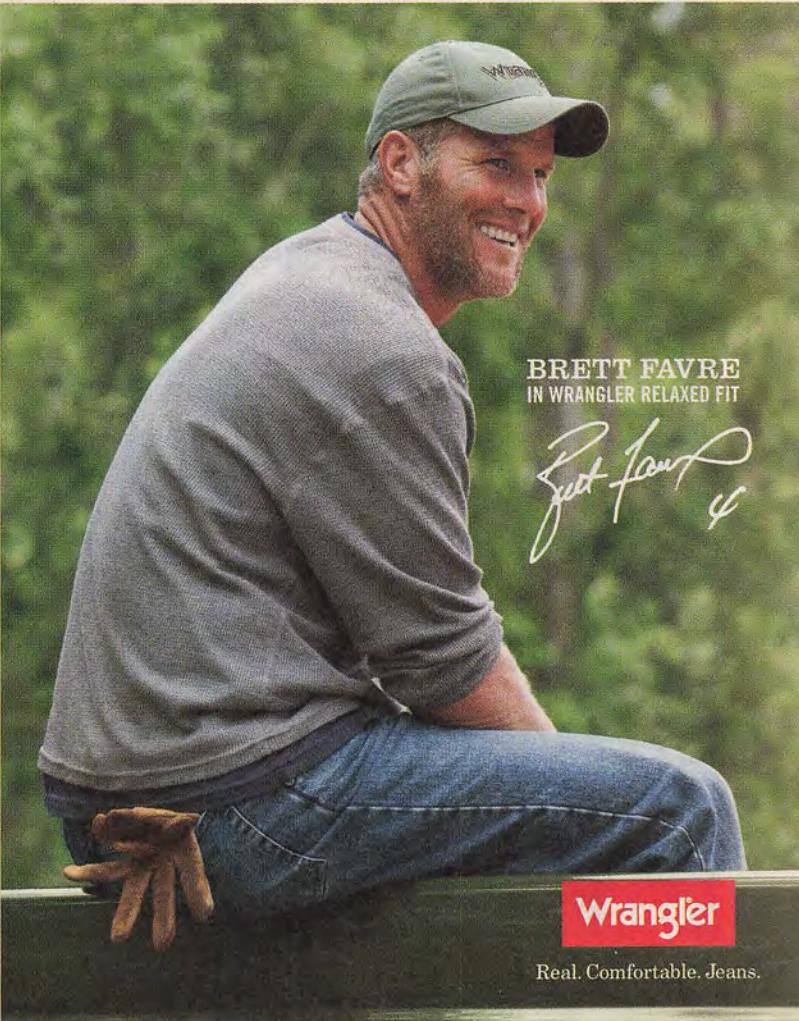


Pierce is a good player. A superstar? Not so much.

3 The onslaught of references to the Celtics' "Big Three" is becoming annoying. Here's the deal: Kevin Garnett is a straight-up superstar. Paul Pierce—apart from his scoring explosion in Game 7 against the Cavaliers—is a determined scorer who nevertheless has struggled to get himself free against wound-up playoff defenses. And Ray Allen, when you're looking at his total floor game, is a poor man's Rip Hamilton. The Celtics are a great defensive team that will endure troubling scoring droughts for as long as they stay alive in the playoffs. —S.G.



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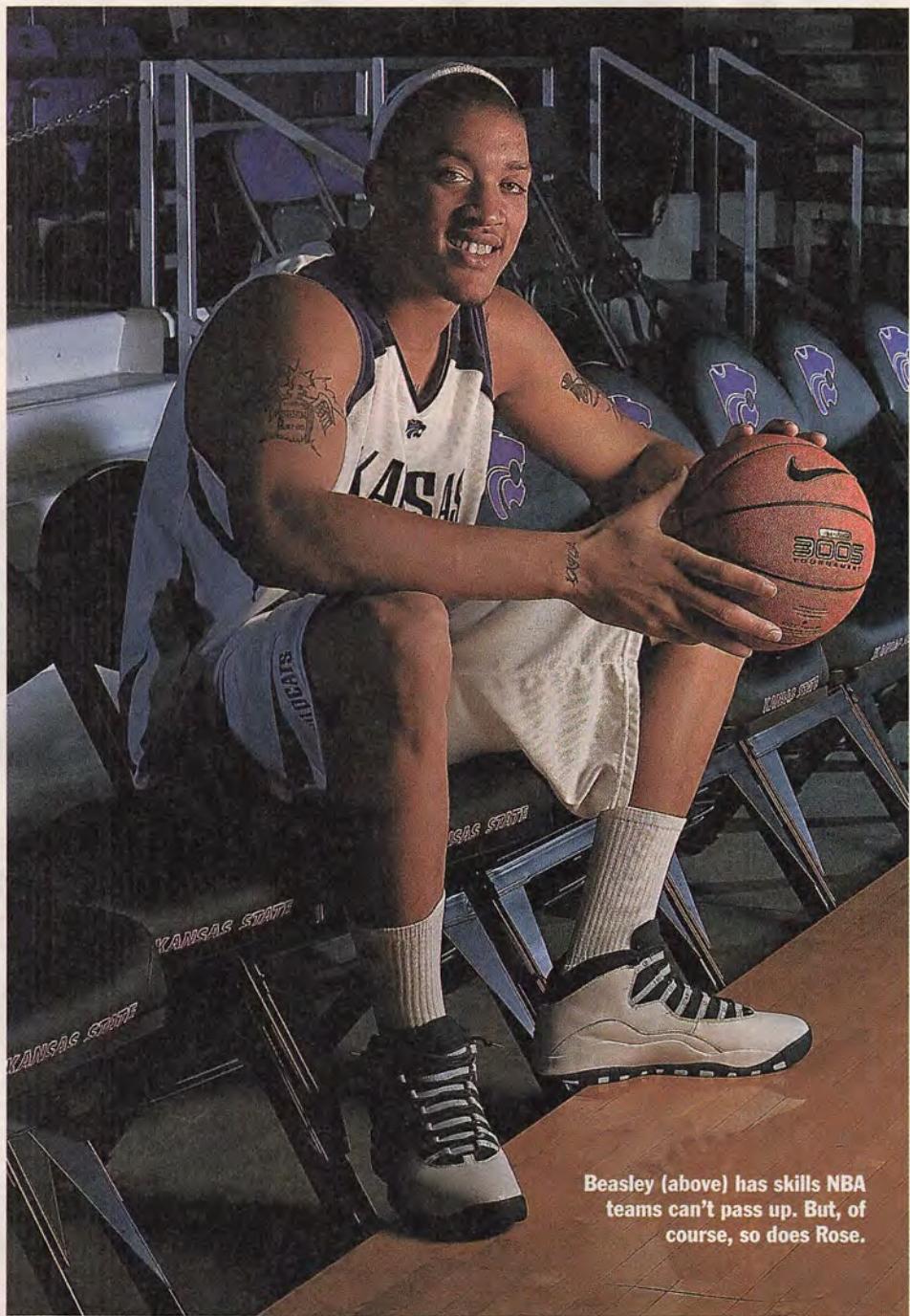


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Running with the Bulls

Draft mystery No. 1, solved: Chicago gets the top pick. Now, on to draft mystery No. 2: Which can't-miss player looks better in red? By Mike DeCourcy



Frank Martin is biased. He tells you that even before he starts filibustering about the wonders of Kansas State star Michael Beasley. Before he is finished, though, Martin acknowledges that deciding which player to choose first in the NBA draft is an impossible choice—or an impossible choice to get wrong.

Should the Chicago Bulls spend their lottery winnings on Beasley or Memphis point guard Derrick Rose?

"If you get a chance to have a 15-year All-Star, you have to take that guy regardless of what your need might be," says Martin, Beasley's coach at Kansas State. "The problem there is, I think Rose has the same kind of ability."

As hard as everybody tried to manufacture a controversy over last year's No. 1 pick—including the Portland Trail Blazers, who incorporated it into their season-ticket pitch—the drama was as contrived as the worst episode of *The Bachelor*. It never made sense for the Blazers to consider Kevin Durant, not with franchise center Greg Oden available.

This year's debate is real. Beasley, who averaged 26.2 points and 12.4 rebounds last season, would give the Bulls a productive presence in the front-court. A bit undersized compared with many of the top NBA power forwards, Beasley's best assets are his hands and his shooting touch. At 6-9, he is capable of scoring inside but does not have exceptional moves. He is extraordinary, though, at shooting from any location inside 20 feet. He can catch and face the basket from anywhere and be a threat to score.

"People don't understand, until you've actually played against him, how strong Mike Beasley is," Martin says. "He just punishes people."

Rose, on the other hand, would stabilize and energize an uncertain backcourt. A shade under 6-4, he has a package of physical gifts few, if any, point guards have matched. Rose needs to shoot better but plays calmly under pressure and would rank with the league's fastest, strongest and highest-leaping point guards.

"He's just an athletic freak," says Robert Dozier, Rose's teammate at Memphis. "The kid's 6-3, and he's getting rebounds with his head above the rim. It's just amazing. I've never seen anything like that."

It's not the easiest choice, but somebody's got to make it.

Mock lotto

1. Chicago Bulls. **Derrick Rose, PG, Memphis.**

He's a hometown Chicago kid, but that's not why he will be the pick. It's because point guards this good are rare and most of those who reside in the neighborhood wind up running championship contenders.

2. Miami Heat. **Michael Beasley, PF, Kansas State.**

The Heat gain a player who automatically will deliver double-doubles and energize an offense that has struggled to score.

3. Minnesota Timberwolves. **Jerryd Bayless, PG, Arizona.**

Although he never was entirely comfortable as a college point guard because of turnover issues, he is a willing passer and his quickness and leaping ability are superior to those of O.J. Mayo, his rival for a high draft position.

4. Seattle SuperSonics. **O.J. Mayo, PG, USC.**

NBA scouts supposedly were disappointed in him early on because years of hype convinced them he would be another LeBron James. He's not, but he can play.

5. Memphis Grizzlies. **Brook Lopez, C/PF, Stanford.**

College defenders had so much trouble keeping him off the right block that questions about the variety of his game remain. He should be a great defender.

6. New York Knicks. **Danilo Gallinari, SF, Italy.**

It's not often a 19-year-old player earns the kind of responsibility and puts up the kind of numbers Gallinari has in Italy and the Euroleague.

7. Los Angeles Clippers. **Anthony Randolph, SF, LSU.**

Randolph is ridiculously athletic for someone so tall (6-10), and college opponents

couldn't deal with that. He's not yet a shooter, though.

8. Milwaukee Bucks. **Eric Gordon, SG, Indiana.**

Converting him to point guard would be a mistake. Gordon is a natural scorer. If the Bulls' Ben Gordon is big enough at 6-3 to do that job, Eric Gordon—with an extra inch and superior leaping ability—can handle it.

9. Charlotte Bobcats. **D.J. Augustin, PG, Texas.**

Augustin is a leader and an expert at playing off the pick-and-roll. The list of players his size (5-11) who have become outstanding players is woefully short, though.

10. New Jersey Nets. **DeAndre Jordan, C, Texas A&M.**

He will be the riskiest pick of the first round. The team that takes him is gambling on a player who hasn't performed against other big men.

11. Indiana Pacers. **Kevin Love, PF, UCLA.**

He has trouble against defenders with length and

doesn't change ends smoothly. But he's probably the best pure basketball player in the draft.

12. Sacramento Kings. **Russell Westbrook, PG, UCLA.**

He still is developing the most important aspects of his game: shooting and directing an offense. But his athleticism ranks with the best at his position.

13. Portland Trail Blazers. **Darrell Arthur, PF, Kansas.**

David West's success with the Hornets ought to create a nice market for Arthur, who has similar size, a comparable game and greater athleticism.

14. Golden State Warriors. **Nicolas Batum, SF, France.**

It's disconcerting that he did not play a bigger role for his French team, but he has excellent athleticism and a true small forward game.

For the rest of Mike DeCourcy's mock draft, go to sportingnews.com.



>DRAFT DISH

and claimed Euroleague titles in 1987 and '88. Now the younger Gallinari could end up playing for D'Antoni's Knicks, who have the sixth pick. "I am not a coach and I don't want Mike's job, but I think Danilo could be great for Mike's style of play," Vittorio Gallinari says. > The Grizzlies finished the season tied for the third-worst record in the league but ended up with the fifth

From the small-world department: **Vittorio Gallinari**, the father (and agent) of the best international player in the draft, 6-9 Italian SF **Danilo Gallinari**, was teammates with **Mike D'Antoni** for nine seasons on Olympia Milano. They shared an apartment for one year, won four Italian League championships

pick in the lottery, continuing a 14-year run of never having the No. 1 pick. G.M. **Chris Wallace** remains positive, though. He says the draft is deep enough that he will be disappointed if he can't find a player to step right into the rotation—Stanford C **Brook Lopez** would be a good fit. > Wallace also believes the team's February trade of PF **Pau Gasol** could look like more than a salary dump by next season, thanks, coincidentally, to Gasol's younger brother. **Marc Gasol**, a second-round pick last season who was sent to Memphis in the trade for his brother, has transformed from a 300-plus-pound teenager to a 7-foot physical force. Marc, 23, dominated a second-division Spanish league last winter and is ready for the NBA. Wallace says bringing in Marc Gasol will be like adding two lottery picks—if the Grizzlies can outbid European clubs for his services. The Grizzlies, who also have the Lakers' first-round pick (28th) this year, will enter the offseason with more room under the salary cap than any team except the 76ers. —Stan McNeal

NHL PLAYOFFS

HOW SWO



Red it is!



The Red Wings bring speed, toughness and experience to the Stanley Cup finals. And they play with a Scandinavian accent. *By Ted Kulfan*

There's nail-biting excitement in Detroit, understandably, as the Red Wings battle in the Stanley Cup finals against the Penguins. But there's also plenty of passion and nervous tension in Stockholm ... and Njurunda ... and Vetlanda ... and Vasteras ... and Pitea.

The young Penguins will have to deal with the Red Wings' Swedish connection in the finals: (from left) Lilja, Holmstrom, Zetterberg, Lidstrom, Kronwall, Samuelsson and Franzen.

Everywhere in Sweden, hockey fans are staying up late to watch one of the most talent-filled NHL championship series in recent memory. And with good reason: In Detroit, the Western Conference champions are known simply as the Red Wings; in the Scandinavian Peninsula of northern Europe, they could legitimately be anointed Team Sweden.

"There is interest over there, maybe a little more than usual," says winger Mikael Samuelsson, one of seven—count 'em, seven—Swedes in the Wings' playoff rotation. "With so many of us on this team, it's just natural."

The interest may be natural, but the probability of having so many players from one European country is not. General manager Ken Holland admits as much, although he insists the Swedish

connection is not because of some obsessive fascination with Swedish hockey players.

It's just coincidence.

"There's no master plan," Holland says. "Our scouts have done a great job, there's good chemistry among our scouts, and we've had success (drafting) in Sweden."

Because of the sustained success the Red Wings have enjoyed over the years, they usually draft low and seldom—if ever—get opportunities to pluck high-end, can't-miss picks.

So, they take chances. That's where Holland deflects credit to assistant G.M. Jim Nill and director of European scouting Hakan Andersson, who have mined considerable talent in the late rounds. Much of it from Sweden, one of the best hockey-producing countries in Europe.

Nicklas Lidstrom, the five-time Norris Trophy winner, was picked in the third round (53rd overall) in 1989. Potential playoff MVP Henrik Zetterberg was selected in the seventh round (210th) in 1999. Johan Franzen, who led the NHL in playoff goals (12) heading into the finals, was a third-round pick (97th overall) in 2004.

And maybe the most eyebrow-raising heist of all was Tomas Holmstrom, who has been one of the NHL's best front-of-the-net players for the last decade. Holmstrom was grabbed in the 10th round (257th overall) in 1994.

"These guys (the Wings organization) have cornered the market in Sweden," veteran defenseman Chris Chelios says.

In addition to those later-round selections, Swedes Samuelsson and defenseman Andreas Lilja were unsung free-agent signees in 2005. Defenseman Niklas Kronwall, projected as a high first-round pick in 2000, fell to the Wings in the 29th slot because he was deemed too small to be a physical force in the NHL. Bottom line: The Wings have taken to Swedish players like metro Detroit shoppers have been drawn to the new IKEA.

"We probably wouldn't be in the playoffs (with-

out the Swedes)," Holland says—a gross understatement.

Back in the prelockout NHL, when there was no salary cap, the Wings were able to take chances on players like Zetterberg and Russian Pavel Datsyuk (sixth round, 1998) because they could afford to take fliers on more traditional, high-priced free agents.

"You would let them stay (home) and develop at their own pace," says Nill. "We didn't have to rush them over here."

So Nill, Andersson and director of amateur scouting Joe McDonnell could unearth their gems, sit back and wait until they were ready to compete in the NHL.

"Hakan has a real ability to kind of say to us heading into the draft, 'I like Johan Franzen, and I think we can get him in the third, fourth round,'" Holland says. "So being together, working together for so long is a real advantage for our staff, and obviously Hakan has been an MVP behind the scenes. He's a guy that's really responsible for Johan



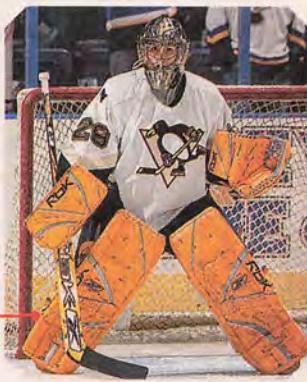
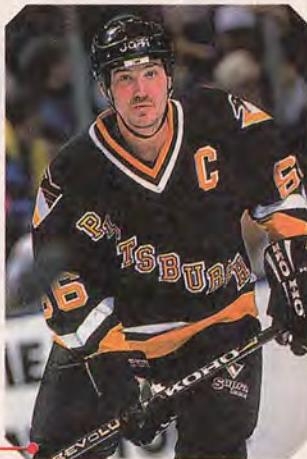
Not only does Samuelsson (37) speak Swedish, he also scores goals, as the Penguins found out in Game 1 of the finals.



A tale of two cities ... and teams

You have to go back 99 years to find the last Detroit-Pittsburgh matchup in a major sports championship series. The Pirates beat the Tigers in baseball's 1909 World Series—eight years before the NHL was established, 17 years before the Red Wings were formed and 58 years before the Penguins made their debut. It's about time these two blue-collar cities dropped the gloves. —Albert Dickson

Detroit	vs.	Pittsburgh
Auto	Troubled industry	Steel
Lions	Sad-sack team	Pirates
1926	NHL debut	1967
10	Cup titles	2
Gordie Howe	Hockey legend	Mario Lemieux
Joe Louis (The Joe)	Home arena	Mellon (The Igloo)
Coney Island hot dog	Culinary delight	Primanti Brothers sandwich
Red Wings	vs.	Penguins
Fast	Playing style	Faster
23	Cups won by players	2
9	Players over 35	1
3	Players under 25	7
Nicklas Lidstrom (38)	Team captain	Sidney Crosby (20)
Chris Osgood (35)	Goalie	Marc-Andre Fleury (23)
Pavel Datsyuk (29), Henrik Zetterberg (27)	Showstoppers	Sidney Crosby (20), Evgeni Malkin (21)



Franzen, Pavel Datsyuk and Tomas Holmstrom.

"It's funny how it works. You've got to be lucky. Jimmy Nill and Hakan Andersson were going on a scouting mission (in 1999) to watch a player by the name of (Mattias) Weinhandl ... and they went to northern Sweden and there happened to be this little guy Zetterberg. When the game was over, they left really having some good feelings about Henrik Zetterberg."

"Weinhandl went in the third or fourth round to somebody else, and we get in the midrounds and we end up taking Henrik Zetterberg, and the rest is history."

So what's it like in the Red Wings' locker room with such a large contingent of Swedish players?

"Sometimes they'll start talking (in Swedish) without realizing it, but not as much as you'd think," says American-born defenseman Brett Lebeda.

There's a reason for restraining such cultural instincts, says Lilja, who once played for a team in the Swedish Elite league that had a large group of players from Finland. Lilja felt uncomfortable and awkward in that environment.

"You remember things like that and don't want to do that in this locker room," he says.

Still, the numbers are a huge luxury for the Swedes, both on and off the ice. They can talk in their native language, keep better track of what's

going on back home and, most important, enjoy a better comfort level with their families. Six of the seven Swedes live in the suburb of Novi, with Zetterberg settled in tony Bloomfield Hills, just down the road.

"When you go on the road trips, you can relax knowing (your family) can hang out with the other families," says Samuelsson, who scored two goals in the Red Wings' Game 1 win. "That's one of the reasons we live there (in Novi). My wife wanted to live by other countrymen."

Kronwall, Zetterberg and Franzen were still relatively young players three seasons ago when the Wings really evolved into Team Sweden. It was a good situation for them to get acclimated to North America and the NHL with so many countrymen sprinkled around the locker room.

"There's a comfort level; it's real nice," Zetterberg says. "You can talk about what's going on back home."

The Wings recently recruited undrafted Swedish player Fabian Brunnstrom—a late-blooming forward who eventually signed with the Stars. During the recruitment, Wings coach Mike Babcock expressed shock that Brunnstrom would even consider joining another team.

"It's so obvious it isn't even funny," Babcock said at the time. "Just move into Novi, Little Sweden, and hang out. I can't even understand how anybody else is in the running. Makes no sense

to me whatsoever. All they (Swedish players) do is they come here, they're comfortable, they play better than they ever have in their life."

When the Wings promoted several minor league players for the playoffs—a taxi squad of sorts—two more Swedes (Mattias Ritola and Jonathan Ericsson) were among them. That brings the total to nine Swedish Wings walking around Joe Louis Arena these days.

And hot goalie prospect Daniel Larsson isn't far away from making it to Detroit.

"It doesn't end," says Holmstrom, who marvels at the popularity the Red Wings have achieved back in Sweden. "They show the games on television live, and in the morning, and sometimes in the afternoon, too. They'll show it three times in a day."

Samuelsson is equally amazed at the way his countrymen have embraced the Wings.

"Not being cocky," he says, "but we're a very popular team with the number of Swedes we have. Not a lot of fans were into the NHL about 10 years ago, but now with the Internet, it's a lot easier to follow, plus there are a lot more Swedish players in the league."

"The fans back home are excited," says Lidstrom, who could become the first European-born captain to lead a Stanley Cup champion. "People are definitely following the games."

The Stanley Cup finals with a Swedish accent. **SN**

Troy

Percival knows exactly why he was brought to Tampa Bay.

So, as he sits in the clubhouse at Busch Stadium during a recent Rays-Cardinals series, his ears perk up at the slightest sign of a brewing incident. The veteran of 13 big league seasons snaps to attention as he hears budding superstar outfielder B.J. Upton call out from across the hall, "Hey, Perc!"

Seems a certain young starting pitcher has been talking a little trash about how he is going to mimic his position-playing teammates and smack out a few base hits during interleague play. Upton strolls into the open area, big smile on his face, and wants to know what Percival is going to do about such brashness. "He ain't gonna get a hit," the 38-year-old closer says with a grin, looking across the clubhouse to make sure ace lefty Scott Kazmir hears him loud and clear. "He ain't gonna get a hit."

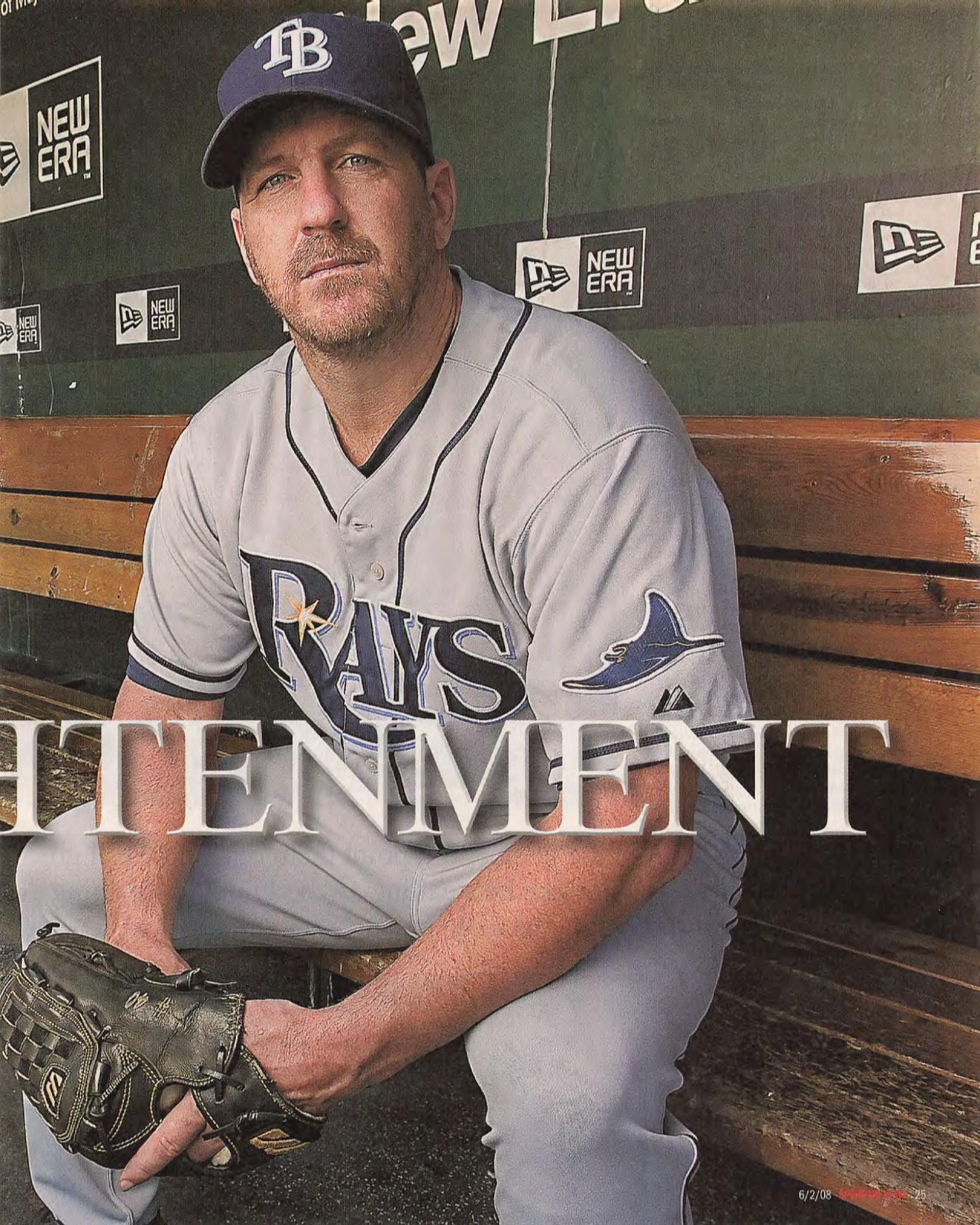
The guys in the clubhouse share a laugh, then get back to the business of continuing their stunning success of 2008—this franchise, which has never won

ERA OF ENLIGHT

Not only is Rays veteran closer Troy Percival providing valuable leadership, he's also pitching lights-out for what is becoming a devil of a team

By Ryan Fagan

Photo by Albert Dickson



HITENMENT

more than 70 games in a season, is contending for the A.L. East lead and has even been atop the division. Percival sits down, leans in and divulges a secret. "Everybody tries to make a big deal of me being a leader in here," he says, his voice lowering, "but I haven't had to do a whole lot, to be honest with you. I just kind of stay out of the way and throw my ninth inning."

Last November, Percival agreed to join third-year Rays manager Joe Maddon, his longtime buddy and former coach with the Angels, and become Tampa Bay's closer. He expected his role to be about 40 percent pitching, 60 percent clubhouse presence for a young team that had, put kindly, severe chemistry issues in recent seasons.

As it turns out, a few key offseason moves by management—trading talented malcontents Delmon Young and Elijah Dukes and bringing in veterans Percival and outfielder/DH Cliff Floyd—solved most of the chemistry problems. The talent has been there; it finally had room to develop free from the strains of tension.

No matter how much Percival says he's just showing up and pitching the ninth inning—which he's doing very well, converting 14 of his first 16 save opportunities—don't believe his shtick about not doing a whole lot in the clubhouse. "It's been a really radical departure from what it's been the past two years," Maddon says. "He is exactly what we needed. Cliff Floyd is exactly what we needed. Those are the kind of guys who have been to the World Series and are willing to share what they believe about the game."

Percival has the knack of drawing on his experiences in a manner that's beneficial to anyone who's listening. He might not have the fires of Tampa's yesteryears to douse, but his impact on the team—especially the pitching staff—has been immediate. "It's hard to explain," Kazmir says. "He'll point out things to the team that not many people would say. If we make mistakes in the game, he'll point them



'If we make mistakes in the game, he'll point them out, and we'll go about our business. It's not like he's calling anybody out or anything like that; he's just motivating us to do better.'

—Rays ace Scott Kazmir on Troy Percival



Percival likes the Rays' young starting pitchers so much that his T-shirt compares them to a pretty fair young Braves threesome from the early 1990s.



out, and we'll go about our business. It's not like he's calling anybody out or anything like that; he's just motivating us to do better and letting us know things that are not accepted around here."

Percival also knows that being the oldest guy on the active roster doesn't make him king of the castle. "In my mind, this is Carl Crawford's locker room," Percival says of the Rays' left fielder, who has been with the club since 2002. "He's been here the longest. He's been fantastic. I didn't know what to expect because I had heard this was a bad, bad clubhouse and he was never happy, but now I see him come in here happy, and that lifts the spirits of everybody else because he's one of our superstars."

Crawford, like Percival, deflects any credit toward his teammates. "My clubhouse?" he says. "Nah, I'm just still learning this stuff. It's a team thing. Everybody's contributing in their own little way, showing their own leadership. It's nobody's clubhouse, really—it's just a matter of everybody being accountable for the things they need to do."

Accountability and Rays players had been rare bedfellows until this season, but then again, so had long-term contracts and rising stars. Already in 2008, the team has signed Kazmir, No. 2 starter James Shields and rookie third baseman Evan Longoria to multiyear deals. "This is obviously the place I want to be for a long period of time, so signing a long-term contract for me is a big plus," Longoria says. "Shields and Kazmir are our No. 1 and 2 guys, and they're going to be that for at least the next three years. And when C.C.'s (Crawford's) contract is up, hopefully they'll sign him to another

Crawford (left) and Longoria (below)
give the Rays energy in the
clubhouse and on the field.



long, big deal that he deserves and we keep this going. If they keep the guys together, it just shows the fans that we're going in the right direction." Crawford, who will turn 27 in August, is signed through this season, and the club holds options for 2009 and 2010.

With an outstanding young rotation, a veteran bullpen and a young core of five-tool players, it doesn't appear the Rays are going to slip back any time soon.

"They have one of the most athletic, if not the most athletic, teams out there, especially in their outfield," a veteran scout says. "Now that they have Kazmir back in the rotation (after an elbow injury), they have a pretty solid starting staff. The surprise has been Andy Sonnanstine and his ability to be successful. He doesn't have the type of stuff that (Edwin) Jackson or Kazmir or (Matt) Garza has, but he has excellent control and deception."

The franchise is embracing the uncharted territory in which it finds itself, and that suits Maddon just fine. See, Maddon has a pet peeve.

He has been in the game professionally for 34 years, and, frankly, is tired of hearing the same baseball terminology and cliches thrown around. Maddon is all about original thoughts—last year, his team motto was "Tell me what you think; not what you've heard." He developed his 2008 concoction this winter while on a bike ride in California, and he passed out new T-shirts a few weeks ago. The back simply reads, in large yellow letters, "9=8."

At its most basic level, it means if his Rays have nine players playing hard for nine innings every night, they'll be one of the eight teams to earn a postseason berth. That's not all, though. "It's the artichoke theory—it only comes in layers," Maddon says. "As we keep going on, I'll bring up the next portion of it. I haven't decided exactly the appropriate time it's going to be because I think once we get to the next part of it, the rest will just tumble."

In a good way, that is, as in things tumbling into place. Not in the usual way for the Rays, as in tumbling to the depths of the A.L. East standings. These are the new-look Rays, having dropped *Devil* from the team name. Players, coaches and even team office staffers are barred by management from saying the D-word. "I'm working on that, actually," Kazmir says. "A couple of days ago I messed up again, so I had to pay the dollar fine. I'm working on it. It's tough, but it's getting easier."

Tough, but getting easier. Percival can relate.

Percival's take on the young starters ...

■ LHP Scott Kazmir, 24; 3-1 record, 1.57 ERA.

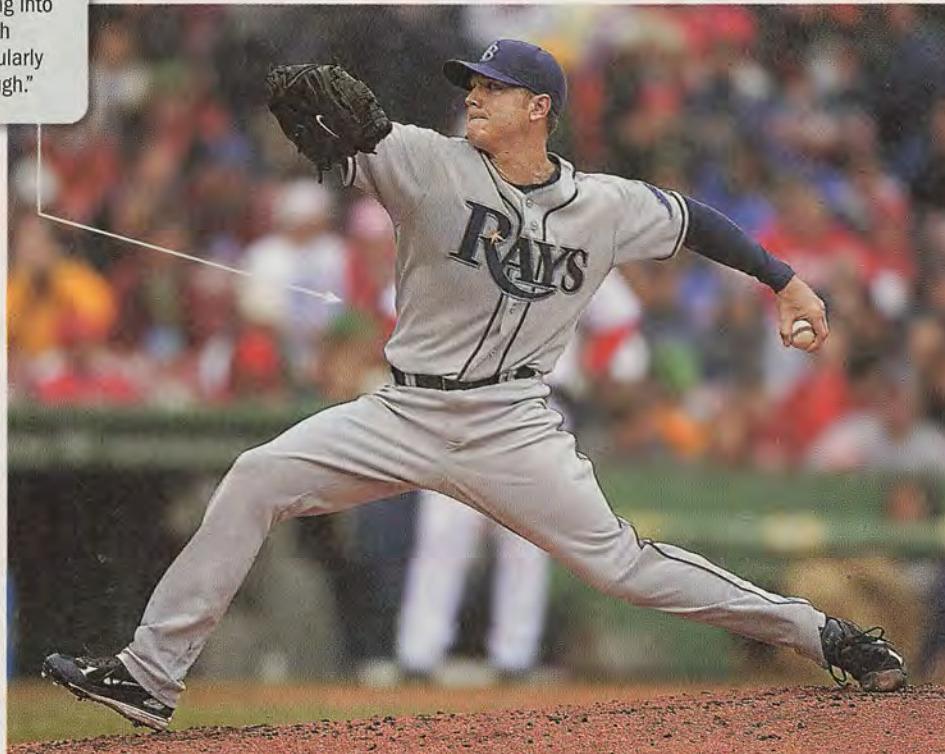
"There's no secret about his stuff. From the left side, there's not many better in the game. To me, right now he's still a work in progress because he was on the D.L. for a while. He'll get those pitch counts down and start getting into the seventh inning regularly soon enough."

■ RHP James Shields, 26; 4-3, 3.20. "He's got one of the best changeups I've ever seen. He doesn't ever want to come out of the game, and I like that. It reminds me of Chuck Finley back in the day. He wants to be out there in the ninth inning."

■ RHP Matt Garza, 24; 3-1, 4.06. "Probably of all of them, he has the most electric stuff—throwing 94 with heavy sink. Now he's learning to throw strikes, and he's going right after hitters. He's not out there throwing 18 off-speed pitches every inning. He's just using his fastball and pitching."

■ RHP Edwin Jackson, 24; 3-3, 3.47. "Just electric stuff. He's got 96 in the bag if he wants it, maybe more, but I'm getting to sit back and watch him learn that 92 located is better than 97 all over the place. He's pitching 92, 92 and then, bam—here comes the 97. He's learning to locate, and that's been fun to watch."

■ RHP Andy Sonnanstine, 25; 6-2, 5.09. "Sonny is so competitive when he's out there. He doesn't give in, and he throws all 18 pitches he's got from whatever angle he's throwing them from. It's good to have a guy like that, to sit there and watch him battle at 87 or 88, locating and changing speeds."



His cell phone was, as kids say these days, blowing up. The text messages and phone calls streamed in, one after the other. Jim Edmonds. Scott Spiezio. Russ Springer. Adam Kennedy. It was May 2007 and Percival was kicking back on his 19-foot jet boat, enjoying the retired life on beautiful Lake Havasu with its crystal clear waters contrasted by the stark desert landscape surrounding this reservoir on the Colorado River, some 300 miles east of Los Angeles.

The phone just wouldn't stop. Word had gotten

around that Percival's arm was feeling miraculously better—he had been forced away from the game almost two years earlier when doctors told him the muscle in his right forearm had completely torn off the bone—and these guys, his former Angels teammates who were together with the Cardinals, wanted to know what was up with the right arm that had nailed down the Angels' only World Series championship, in 2002. They wanted to see for themselves, and it just so happened the Cards were heading to Los Angeles for a series with the Dodgers. "So I loaded up my boat the next morning, drove all the way to L.A. and



... and Scott Kazmir's take on Percival

■ RHP Troy Percival, 38; 14 saves, 2.70. "You never know what he's going to throw. He's the type of guy you can't have a scouting report on. He's just a competitor out there, and you're going to get the best of what he has, whatever he's got that day. He's just the guy who gets it done."

threw a bullpen, which was just god-awful," says Percival.

He hadn't thrown off a mound in six months, and that session was just a 50 percenter with the simple goal of remembering what standing on the mound felt like. This whole comeback had started purely by chance. Percival was coaching his son's little league team when, at a practice, he was playing catch with one of his assistant coaches, who kept moving farther and farther back. He started throwing harder and harder, and the ball was showing more life than it had in five years. He woke up pain-free the next day. So he did it again,

and again, and again. He spent spring training with the Angels as a special instructor and threw every day.

Then, the opportunity with the Cardinals came up. "What he said was that he wanted to come out and 'let it go,' and if there was something there, he'd try playing," Cardinals pitching coach Dave Duncan says. "And if there wasn't, he kind of hoped he'd blow his arm out so he'd stop thinking about it. I wasn't overly impressed. I didn't see anything really special, but it was good enough to give him the opportunity to try and get back if he was willing to take an assignment."

Percival didn't concern himself with a lack of control or a top velocity around 88 mph. When he felt the surge of competitive adrenaline and a renewed fire that four years of constant arm pain had sapped from him, he knew he could make this comeback happen.

He headed to Class AAA Memphis, where he had a 1.35 ERA in six games before joining the Cardinals. He was outstanding in his little-bit-of-this, little-bit-of-that role with St. Louis, finishing with a 1.80 ERA and allowing only 24 hits in 40 innings. "We didn't really know what to expect until he came in," Duncan says. "And he pretty much did whatever we asked him to do, did a good job doing it and never complained a bit about it."

Percival parlayed that success into a two-year, \$8 million deal with the Rays. As much as he'd like to be the big, burly closer who storms out of the gate flinging 100-mph fastballs (as he once did with the Angels, for whom he saved 316 games), he's no longer that guy. His fastball touches 94 but mostly resides in the 90-to-92 range. His curveball plays a much more prominent role than it used to, and he's learning a new pitch—again.

With the Cardinals, he learned a cutter from Springer. This year, he says he learned a changeup from Shields, though the two argue on just how much credit Shields should get. Percival says all of it, but Shields says, "I didn't really teach him how to throw it. He claims I did, but I just showed him a few things about how I throw it, my grip, and he's been pitching really well with it. The first game I ever saw him throw it, he threw it on a 3-2 count and struck a dude out in Yankee Stadium. He's having fun with it."

That daily give-and-take between the young and old, between the newbies and veterans, is the glue that bonds this Rays clubhouse together. Percival, for all the wisdom and advice he dishes out, feels he's getting more from his teammates than he's giving.

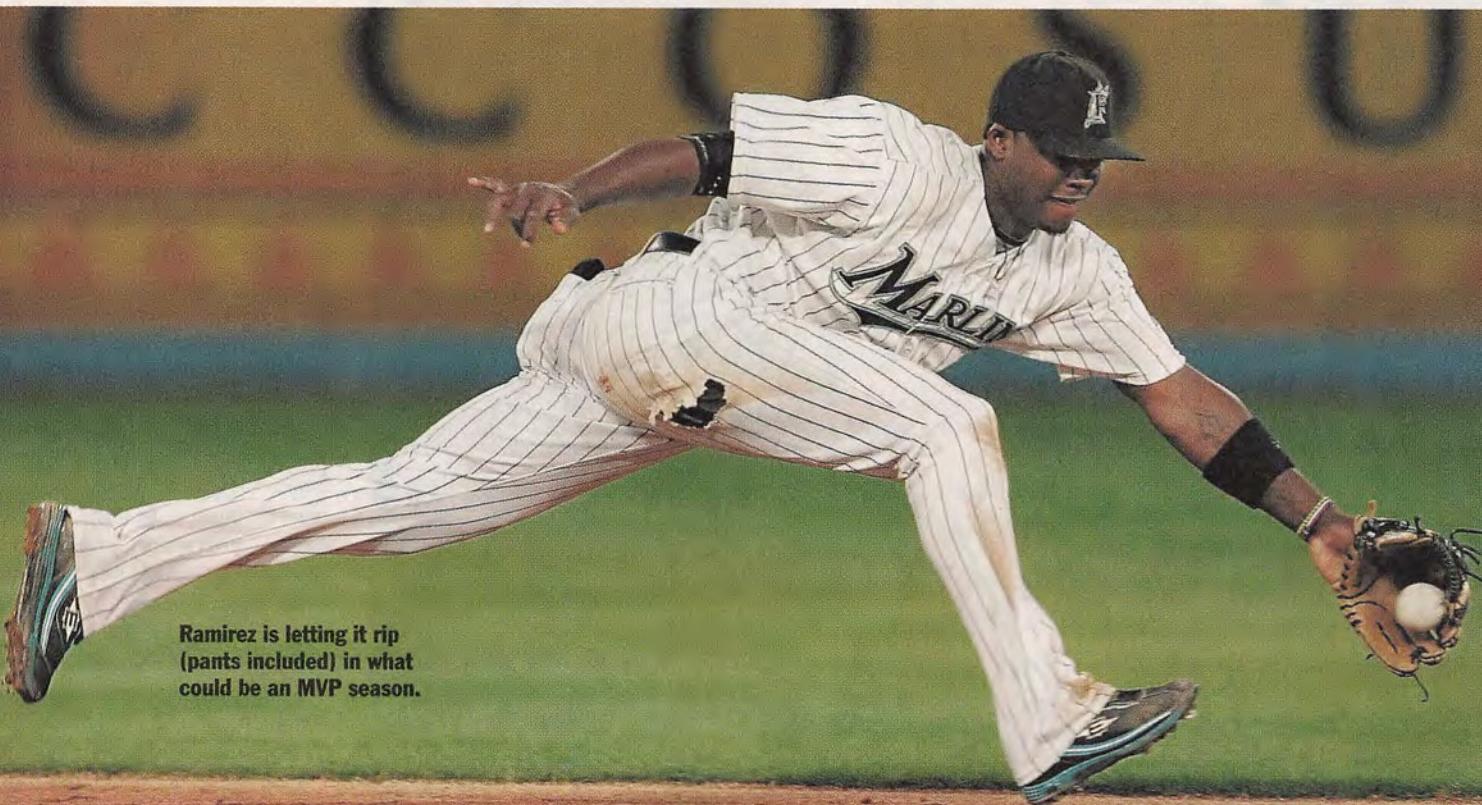
"Here, I've got a bunch of kids who are enthusiastic to play, who are hungry to win," he says. "And we've got starters who are going deep into games—everything is working out good. It's keeping me young. In order to come in here every day, I can't come in and be the crotchety old guy. I've got to have a little life because these guys are fun."

Winning, enthusiasm, fun? In Tampa? This is turning into a devil of a team.

SN

Florida's success is mystifying, but this low-payroll bunch has enough pluses—Hanley Ramirez, for one—to stay in the hunt.

Fish out of water as contenders? Not the Marlins



Ramirez is letting it rip (pants included) in what could be an MVP season.

By Sean Deveney

sdeveney@sportingnews.com

Scouts are the lifeblood of baseball's observer class. Before games, they mingle with media members in the press room, sharing *remember-when?* stories and *can-you-believe-that?* tales. And opinions. Many opinions.

Which makes surprising the silence in the air when one subject of particular interest is broached: the Florida Marlins. Ask scouts about Greg Maddux's fastball or Alex Rodriguez's swing, about baserunning or defense, about global warming or the mortgage crisis, and you'll get an opinion. Ask about the Marlins, though, and you get foot-shuffling and chirping crickets.

That's because, in seizing first place in the National League East, the Marlins have confounded

baseball wisdom. They're supposed to stink. Their ace is 6-foot-9 journeyman lefty Mark Hendrickson, a soon-to-be 34-year-old who had a stint in the NBA. The Marlins finished in last place in 2007 at 71-91. They then traded their best pitcher (Dontrelle Willis) and their best hitter (Miguel Cabrera) for prospects. The 2008 roster had *monumental loser* written all over it. Florida's payroll is about \$22 million, the lowest in baseball and more than \$20 million below the second-lowest team. With revenue sharing, some complain that Florida's payroll is the equivalent of

No wonder scouts are so puzzled. Still, as the Marlins tackled a 10-game prove-it road trip against division rivals New York, Philadelphia and

Atlanta, a handful of scouts spoke about the team's success, forging this list of things you should know about these accidental contenders:

■ **They're not as young as you think.** Not in terms of position players, at least. Just because you haven't heard about many Marlins doesn't mean they're young. Only three regulars—shortstop Hanley Ramirez, outfielder Jeremy Hermida and third baseman Jorge Cantu—are younger than 27, and Cantu is not the

long-term answer at third. Slugging first baseman Mike Jacobs (27) and second baseman Dan Uggla (28) aren't old, but they're already in their primes. The Marlins have gone pitching-heavy in the draft in recent years, to the detriment of position players.

■ **Ramirez is an MVP candidate.** Before this

Florida's fate likely rests in the same place it did for Arizona last year—with a strong-armed setup crew.

season, that statement would have been qualified with the phrase "sometime in the future." But as the Marlins look more and more legit, so do the shortstop's MVP chances.

The future is in the rotation. After Hendrickson, the Marlins have four starting pitchers 25 or younger, none with more than two full years as a starter. Lefty Andrew Miller, a former No. 6 overall pick acquired as part of the Willis-Cabrera trade with Detroit, struggled in April but was 3-1 with a 1.44 ERA in his first four May starts. No one likes the knucklehead antics of Scott Olsen, but he has straightened out enough (for now) and put up a 3.38 ERA in his first 10 starts. If this is the year Olsen grows up, he could win 15 games. There are key youngsters in back-of-the-rotation jobs—primarily Ricky Nolasco and Burke Badenhop—but if Hendrickson, Olsen and Miller stay on track, the remainder of the rotation will need to be little more than adequate.

The present is in the bullpen. This group gets entirely too little attention. One scout points out that this year's Marlins have similarities to last year's Diamondbacks, who won 90 games and advanced to the NLCS, in that they are being carried by their relievers. Kevin Gregg has developed into a top-tier closer, and Florida's fate likely rests in the same place Arizona's did last year—with a strong-armed setup crew (Doug Waechter, Renyel Pinto, Matt Lindstrom, Justin Miller and Logan Kensing). The bullpen's 3.22 ERA ranks third in the NL.

The N.L. East is winnable. There are plenty of doubts about the Marlins beyond their paltry payroll. The defense, though improved, is still bad. They still can't draw fans. But one scout says other division contenders—the Phillies, Braves and Mets have been early disappointments—sport holes that won't disappear. The Marlins aren't perfect, and they remain an unpopular topic of discussion, but all the silence and shuffling of feet doesn't change the reality: This team could be a contender.

SN

S Carlos Quentin's emergence has been a pleasant surprise for the White Sox but no surprise at all to Quentin—so says Sean Devaney at sportingnews.com.

speedreads

Speeding up the game is always good, but don't get too excited over MLB's new directive to umpires asking that they enforce the guidelines in place for keeping up the pace of the game. Every couple of years, it seems, MLB makes a big to-do about pace, the games get a bit shorter, then everyone forgets about it again until another to-do comes up.

What has gotten into Angels LHP Joe "Cy" Saunders? He says that part of the credit for his 8-1 record and 2.31 ERA belongs to pitching coach **Mike Butcher**, who worked out with Saunders over the winter (both live just outside Phoenix). One of the things the two worked on was ensuring that Saunders throws his changeup from the same arm slot as his fastball—otherwise, it is too easy for hitters to spot the difference and adjust. The results have been outstanding. Hitters are not making solid contact against Saunders—the slugging percentage he has allowed has dropped from .446 last year to .306 this season. He has become more confident and efficient, too, unafraid to throw strikes. He is third in the big leagues in fewest pitches per inning (13.7). ▶ Talk that the Reds might send RF **Ken Griffey** back to Seattle has cooled, in part because the Mariners hit a five-game losing snag last week that left them 11½ games out of even a wildcard spot. But word is the Mariners also don't think Griffey, 38, is good enough anymore to warrant the top prospects Cincinnati wants in return. ▶

There could be a reward for Rangers CF **Josh Hamilton**, who has backed up his breakout year in Cincinnati with an MVP-caliber two months in Texas. The Rangers are considering signing him to a multiyear contract extension, similar to those received by many other budding stars with little service time (most recently Marlins SS **Hanley Ramirez**, Rays 3B **Evan Longoria** and

The Dodgers' Andruw Jones was scheduled to have surgery on his right knee this week, which could keep him out 'til July. It's a good time to offer two words that could help the surprisingly portly Jones make his comeback easier: rice cakes.

Brewers LF **Ryan Braun**). Hamilton's situation is far more complex, though. He is 27 and more polished than most guys with limited service. But his past, marred by drug abuse that he seems to have put behind him, is a mitigating factor. ▶ A little

more support might make LHP **Randy Johnson**'s quest for 300 wins a bit easier. In his first start of the year, the Diamondbacks' defense gave up five unearned runs—three while Johnson was pitching—in a 1-run D-backs loss. Last weekend, Johnson struck out 10 in six innings, but Arizona, mustering just three hits, lost, 3-1, in Atlanta. Johnson, 44, remains at 288 wins. ▶ Red Sox fans should not get too excited about the season debut of RHP **Bartolo Colon**, who gave up two runs in five innings in his return



Hamilton's ability to put up Texas-sized numbers with the bat could earn him a multiyear contract extension with the Rangers.

from shoulder rehab. One scout says it was no accident that Boston started Colon against the Royals, who rank last in the A.L. in runs. "They could get a couple of good months out of him," the scout says, "but he's probably going to wear down once the shoulder pain kicks in, like last year." Colon, 35, started 5-0 in 2007, then went 1-8 the rest of the season.

The Mets are struggling, often looking lifeless, and manager Willie Randolph is hearing his name continually pop up in firing rumors. But a large part of the problem is player complacency. Firing Randolph would not help that. In fact, it would hurt because it would give the players a pass for their failure.

Get 'em before they're hot

Baseball's annual selection process, which takes place June 5-6, doesn't draw the attention the NFL and NBA drafts do, but the infusion of little-known talent it produces is just as significant

By Ryan Fagan

Ah, the first round of the baseball draft. Not nearly as hyped as the NFL or NBA draft, and only slightly more than the NHL extravaganza. Heck, the first round of the baseball draft wasn't even televised until last year.

But it's every bit as important. Take a look at the standings. The Diamondbacks, who share the best record in the National League, are getting major contributions from four consecutive first-round picks: Conor Jackson (2003), Stephen Drew (2004), Justin Upton (2005) and Max Scherzer (2006). The Angels are atop the A.L. West thanks to contributions from Casey Kotchman (2001), Joe Saunders (2002) and Jered Weaver (2004).

The biggest difference between the Major League Baseball draft and the other sports' is that players drafted in the first round don't typically become stars at the big league level immediately. That's just not the way baseball is set up. It takes a couple of years.

"In a perfect world, all these players get time in the minor leagues, get accustomed to the game at the professional level and get accustomed to not only hitting with wood bats but pitching against wood," says Grady Fuson, the Padres' director of scouting and player development. "And more importantly, just learning the nuances of being at the ballpark seven days a week."

Fuson, like scouting directors everywhere, has spent the past several months crisscrossing the country to watch the best and brightest talents available in next week's draft. He provides insights on a handful of college players who are almost certain first-rounders.

Pedro Alvarez, 3B, Vanderbilt

How good is Alvarez? Good enough that he's still in the conversation for No. 1 overall pick despite missing the first 23 games this season with a broken hand. He hit 40 home runs overall in his first two seasons at Vandy and has starred for Team USA the past two summers. Oh, and he's hitting .312 with 28 RBIs and 42 runs scored in 37 games since returning.

Fuson's take: I really don't think the injury has hurt him. People have seen him so much in the past—freshman year, sophomore year, Team USA. He's come back from the injury and performed very well.

Brett Wallace, 3B, Arizona State

As good as he was last year as the Pac-10's player of the year—and the league's triple crown winner—Wallace has been better this season, hitting .412 with 20 homers and 78 RBIs.

Fuson's take: Unique player; certainly not the body type that most people are looking for, but he's a gamer with the bat and had a monster year. He's an RBI machine; a very aggressive player who has more skills than you'd see with just one look. He's a guy you'd need to see numerous times to appreciate where his skill level is.

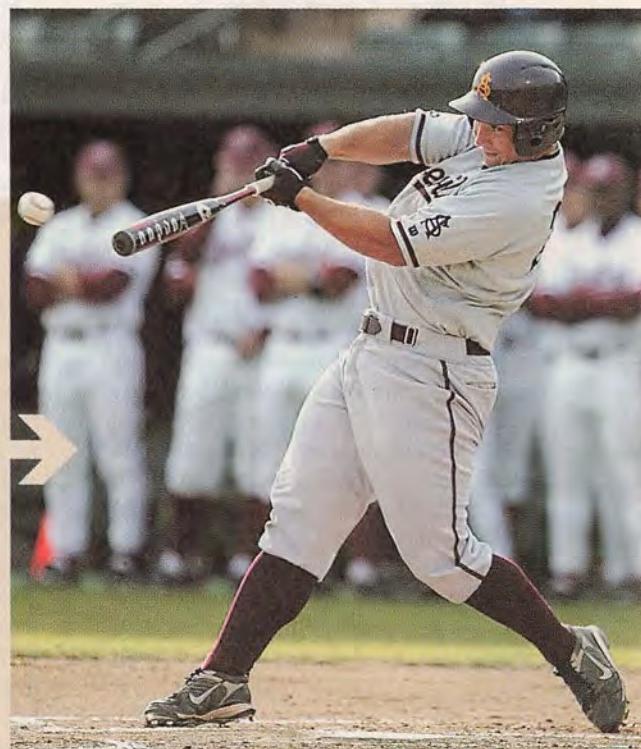
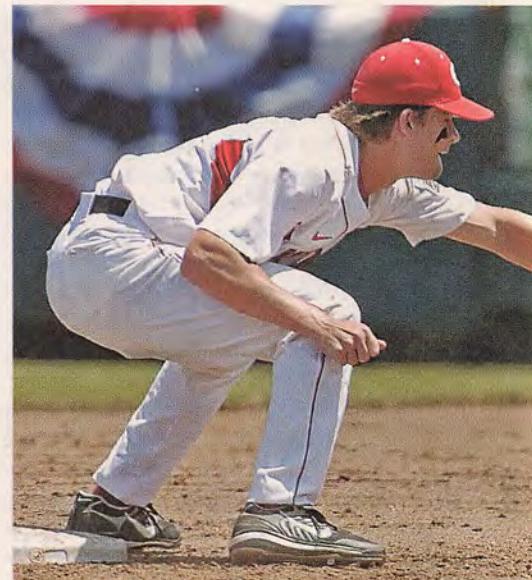
Brian Matusz, LHP, San Diego

This 6-5 lefty's stock has risen with an outstanding season—he was the West Coast Conference's pitcher of the year and finished the regular season 11-2 with a 1.88 ERA and 131 strikeouts in 96 innings—and is a likely top five pick.

Fuson's take: He's had a very dominating year. He's one of the few college pitchers who possess the stuff and the ability to pitch now. He has good touch on the mound.

Joshua Fields, RHP, Georgia

The SEC pitcher of the year, Fields has a fastball

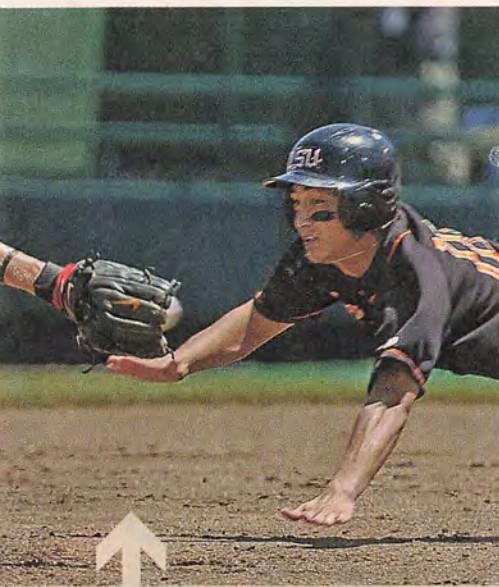


that touches 98 mph. He has 16 saves and an eye-popping 53 strikeouts in 29⅓ innings this year.

Fuson's take: A small (6-0, 178) righthander who just has electric stuff. He throws hard, has a big downer curveball. Kind of a two-pitch guy, possibly a reliever all the way.

Shooter Hunt, RHP, Tulane

The Tulane media guide says Hunt earned his nickname from Dennis Hopper's role in *Hoosiers*, but big league clubs are counting on him to be a little more reliable than Hopper's character. This season, Hunt is 9-3 with a 2.45 ERA and 119 strike-



Gordon Beckham, SS, Georgia

Beckham, who wasn't drafted out of high school, is the SEC player of the year. He led the Bulldogs in homers and RBIs the past two seasons and is hitting .394 in 2008.

Fuson's take: A unique guy; started off with a monster March and April and then kind of cooled off. He's one of the few middle-of-the-diamond players out there who seem to possess the needed skills.

outs in 91½ innings.

Fuson's take: Big stuff, but has trouble controlling the baseball a little bit. I'm sure some people have seen him quite dominant and some people have seen him a little erratic. It'll be interesting to see where he ends up.

Justin Smoak, 1B, South Carolina

He's a good fielder and a switch hitter who struggled last summer with Team USA but rebounded in his junior season with the Gamecocks.

Fuson's take: He's a physical kid having a monster year. He controls the strike zone and has really put everything together and put himself in a very good position to go high.

Jason Castro, C, Stanford

He has rebounded from a poor 2007 campaign to re-establish himself as a first-round pick. A lefthanded hitter, Castro is leading the Cardinal with a .370 batting average and 56 RBIs.

Fuson's take: Kind of a tall (6-3), rangy-frame guy. A converted player who hasn't been behind the plate a whole lot but has good hands and shows a flash of throwing and a flash of offense. You can project a bit, and he looks to possibly be a complete player.

SN

Q&A

Justin Smoak, 1B University of South Carolina

A Gamecock with a big game

Justin Smoak, part of the strong group of college first basemen who are projected by Baseball America as high picks in this year's draft, started all 56 of South Carolina's regular-season games as a junior this year, batting .389 with 20 home runs and 61 RBIs. Smoak, whose on-base and slugging percentages were .509 and .758, also checked in with a .993 fielding percentage.

SN: You were drafted out of high school (Athletics, 16th round in 2005). What was the process like?

Smoak: It was all really new to me coming out of high school. Going through the draft process out of high school is going to help this year. You know that you never know what's going to happen until it actually happens.

SN: Matt Wieters, your childhood friend, was drafted last year (fifth overall by the Orioles). Did he tell you anything about what he went through?

Smoak: No, not really. I know it came down to the wire for him (Wieters signed just before the August 15 deadline).

SN: Growing up, you were a Braves fan—and a switch hitter. Was that Chipper Jones' influence?

Smoak: (Smiling) No, not really. My dad always influenced me. I was a natural righthanded hitter and a lefthanded thrower, and my dad said you don't see a lot of those guys. He tried to get me to take some swings lefthanded, and since high school I've

just stuck with it.

SN: You played in the Cape Cod League—a collegiate wood bat league—as a sophomore. Metal, wood—what's the difference?

Smoak: The biggest difference is that you have to make consistent contact with the wood bat. With the metal bat, you can miss balls sometimes and still hit them out.

SN: Some other college first basemen are rated high. Do you try to stack them up and see where you fit?

Smoak: No. I've played this game for a while now. I know that there are a lot more first basemen than just me in the country who are good. You've got Yonder Alonso at Miami and Allan Dykstra at Wake Forest. I guess it's just a matter of whichever team likes a certain player.

SN: I noticed one of your hobbies is golf. What's your handicap?

Smoak: I'm not that good of a golfer. I definitely get my money's worth out here. —Tom Gatto



South Carolina coach Ray Tanner on Smoak:

"Outstanding hitter. A guy who can use the entire field but will hit some home runs. Sometimes he's mistaken as a power hitter; he's a good hitter who hits home runs. He hits breaking balls, he hits changeups, he hits fastballs. He's a potential Gold Glove at first base. He has tremendous poise and composure and discipline to play this game."

A climate for change

Cold-weather states haven't traditionally produced much top-tier baseball talent, but a New Jersey academy—with its state-of-the-art dome—is doing something about that *By Sean Devaney*

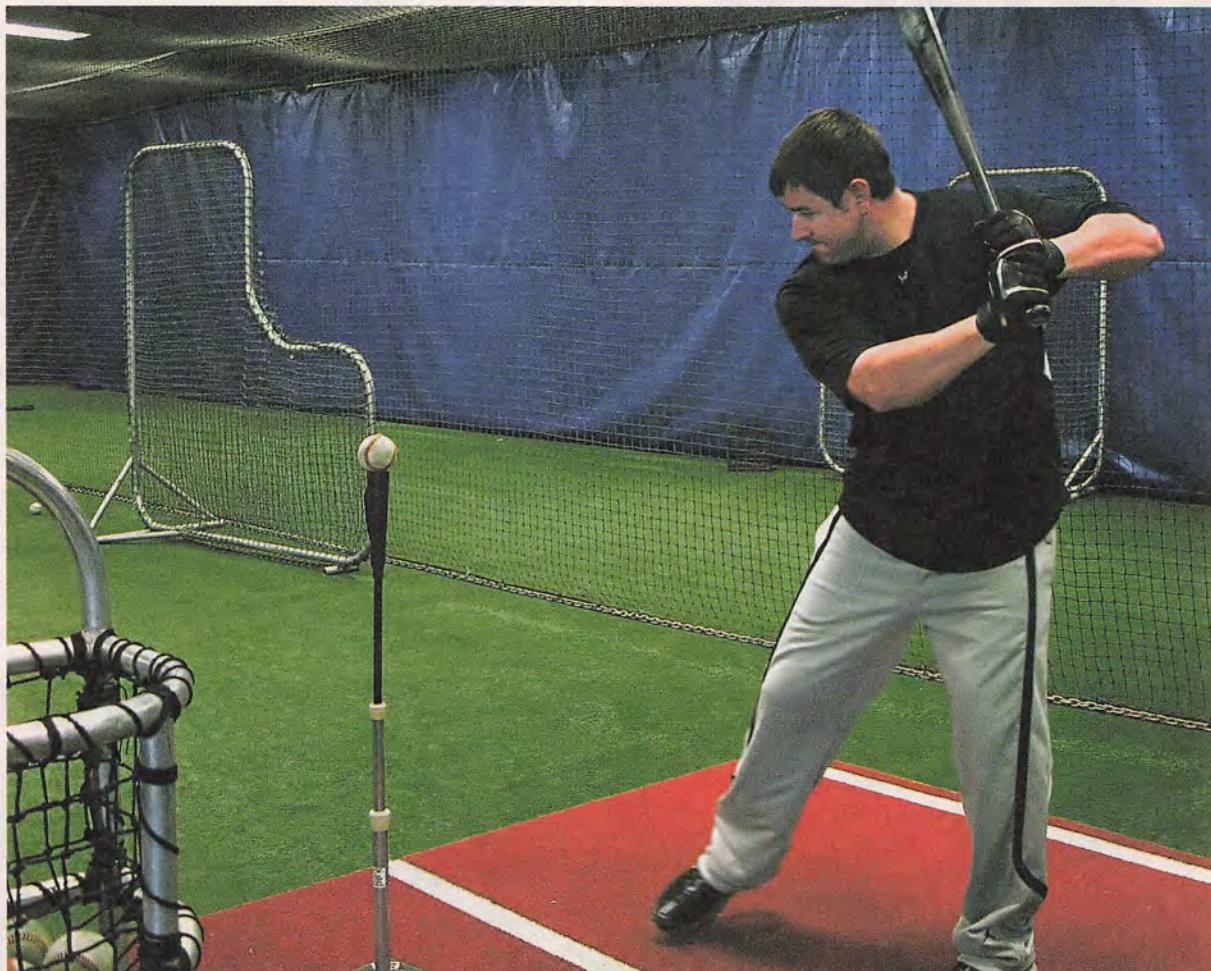
It started 18 years ago in Flemington, N.J., when Jack Cust Sr.—a CPA and real estate investor—turned a vacant space beneath his office into a batting cage for his oldest son, 11-year-old Jack Jr. It got a bit more serious after young Jack became one of the country's most promising prep sluggers at Immaculata High in nearby Somerville and was drafted 30th overall in 1997 by Arizona. Cust Jr. would need a place to work on his hitting between minor league seasons.

Cust Sr. owned a large patch of land occupied mostly by warehouses. One was vacant, a perfect place to set up a cage and let Cust Jr. hone his swing throughout the cold winter months. "It wasn't much," Cust Sr. says. "Just a regular warehouse. But it was a good start."

Turns out, Cust Sr. was starting something big—a concept that would impact baseball all around the country. The converted warehouse evolved into the Jack Cust Baseball Academy, which now provides an impressive training ground for players 5-18 years old. Cust Sr., who says he was an average outfielder on a very good team at Seton Hall, specializes in hitting instruction but has a full-time staff that teaches all aspects of the game to as many as 1,000 kids per year. He also maintains a full complement (different age groups) of traveling teams called Diamond Jacks.

The warehouse was replaced by a state-of-the-art domed facility, which was built in 2004 at a cost of more than \$1 million. It's an odd but impressive structure—110 feet high and 130,000 square feet—that Cust bills as the largest domed building dedicated to amateur sports in the country.

And, oddly, it's located in this ripe hotbed of



Thanks to the academy Cust's father built, even kids from New Jersey can work on their swings in the winter months.

baseball training, a few miles north of Flemington (population 4,200) in the dense woods of northwest New Jersey.

The dome's purpose is to allow players to continue training through the tough Northeast winters. Those winters, Cust Sr. says, are all that prevent New Jersey and other cold-weather states from producing more top-tier baseball talent.

"Why shouldn't we have baseball players here?" Cust says. "Places like California or Texas or Florida don't have naturally better athletes than everybody else. They're just able to train year-round."

'Why shouldn't we have baseball players here? Places like California or Texas or Florida don't have naturally better athletes than everybody else. They're just able to train year-round.' —Jack Cust Sr.

Florida don't have naturally better athletes than everybody else. They're just able to train year-round. New Jersey has put out a lot of players in the NBA and the NFL because they don't depend on the weather. Why not make that apply to baseball, too? Let's show what our kids can do."

They're doing quite well for themselves. Only two cold-weather states—Colorado and New Jersey—have more than one player in the top 50 high school prospects for this year's draft, according to

ESPN RISE magazine's rankings. The two Jersey boys—outfielder Matt Marquis and pitcher Quinton Miller—trained at Cust's academy. A third player, pitcher Jason Knapp, has committed to North Carolina and is just outside the top 50 (according to Cust, Knapp has been touching 97 mph on the radar gun). The academy had five players drafted last year and eight in 2006, including Bill Rowell, chosen ninth overall by the Orioles.

"Matt has been with Jack for 10 years now," says Al Marquis, Matt's father. "What's great about it is that Jack has a system—he has 15 principles of hitting—that you learn when you are young, and, as you grow and get older, you continue with those principles. So, Matt's swing has been consistent all his life. Wherever he's played, he's never been overmatched because he is learning the same things over and over, all year round."

The principles of Cust's teachings—based on patience and power—are evident in his son, who struggled to stick in the big leagues after that '97 draft but finally enjoyed a breakthrough with the Athletics last season. This year, Cust is hitting .252 but ranks seventh in the American League in OPS (on-base plus slugging percentage). He learned the physical mechanics of swinging from his father. Cust Sr. also teaches the mental side of hitting: Have a plan when you step to the plate, ensure that you get the right pitch to hit, and don't get yourself out. He spends as much time teaching kids to understand a pitcher's thought process as he does physical things, such as where to hold the back elbow.

"That's the kind of hitter I have always been," says Cust Jr. "And there's no question where that comes from."

The surprise isn't that it comes from his father; the surprise is that it's occurring in New Jersey.

Cust Sr. says he expects as many as eight players from his academy to be drafted this year. He also says the implications of that success are important. With major league scouts trotting around the globe in search of talent, it's apparent the game is not doing enough to develop talent in cold-weather states right here in the U.S.

"Most years, you might find three or maybe four really good players out of a place like the Northeast," says one scout. "I mean the whole region, Maine to New Jersey, Pennsylvania. The kids just don't have the fundamentals because four months a year, they're not playing. It's hard to see that changing anytime soon."

But it could change. Players in places that don't traditionally produce high draftees could get better opportunities to fulfill their potential. All it takes is serious instruction—and a million-dollar dome.

One academy in one small town in northwest New Jersey is proving that.

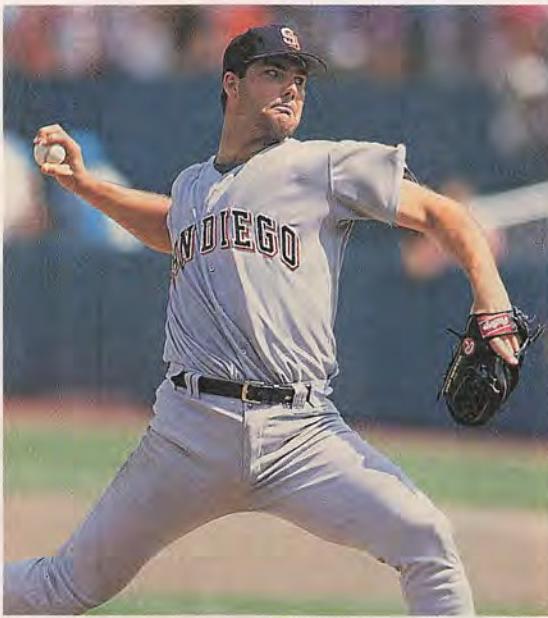
SN

Q&A

**Former RHP
Andy Benes**

Still head of the class

Andy Benes, the first player selected in major league baseball's free-agent draft 20 years ago, posted a 155-139 record in 14 seasons with the Padres, Mariners, Cardinals and Diamondbacks, giving him distinction as the most successful pitcher taken at No. 1 since the draft began in 1965.



SN: What do you remember about draft day 1988?

BENES: It wasn't that big a deal, nothing like it is today. My wife and I were at her parents' house in Evansville (Ind., where he grew up). I was picked for the Olympic team and was getting ready to leave for training camp. We were just kind of sitting around waiting for a call. I had been told I would go high, and I knew the Padres were interested. But you don't know what's going to happen 'til somebody calls your name.

SN: And the rest of the day?

BENES: The Padres arranged for a news conference at Evansville (where Benes had gone to college). Somebody had made up a Padres jersey with my name on it. I thought that was pretty cool. I grew up a Cardinals fan, but the Padres were a perfect fit for me.

SN: Was being the first choice an advantage or disadvantage?

BENES: I'm sure I got some chances before other guys because of where I was drafted. I signed what was a big bonus then (\$235,000, the highest paid to anybody up to that point) and there were expectations. It was a good situation.

SN: And only a little more than a year later you were pitching for the Padres. Were you ready for that?

BENES: The Padres had a veteran staff—Bruce

Hurst, Ed Whitson, Dennis Rasmussen, Eric Show. Those guys took the pressure off. They were very good to me. There was no animosity about the money; kidding around, yes, but all in good fun. Bruce Hurst took me under his wing, and he was a great guy to learn from.

SN: Did it bother you that two guys from that draft appeared in the majors before you did?

BENES: Not at all. I spent about three months in double-A and one month in triple-A. I was called up in August and went 6-3. We were in a pennant race down to the last week of the season. That's a great experience. I had to learn to pitch at the major league level, and, in retrospect, that probably wasn't the best thing.

It might have been better if I had started at triple-A because I was a little bored at double-A. I could overpower hitters, so I'd throw about 110 fastballs and 10 breaking balls. I wasn't challenged as much as I could have been. I learned you can't do that against major league hitters.

SN: How long did it take you to learn to pitch?

BENES: Only about 14 years. I wish I could have learned in my first year what I learned in my last year. The biggest thing a young pitcher can learn is command of a changeup. When Greg Maddux was coming up through the minors, I think the Cubs forced him to throw a quota of changeups in every game. I think 10 percent, and he threw it regardless of the situation. You can see what it did for him. I threw my fastball hard and my slider was hard, so I didn't have anything off that to keep a batter honest.

I wish I had been asked to or had forced myself to throw a change early in my career. That would have made me a better pitcher. At the end, I was throwing my fastball only 86 but breaking bats because I threw a good changeup.

SN: Are you happy with your career?

BENES: I was able to finish on a good note. Lou Brock told me, "You'll never regret that. Not everybody gets to do that." Most guys are told when they're done. I was able to say I'm done. I've never looked back. No regrets. —John Rawlings

THE CLOSER



Todd Jones

Most umps don't need to say they're sorry—but replay is coming

After everyone made such a huge deal when a couple of home run calls were blown, I decided to set the record straight: Umps today are great.

Relationships between umps and players are awesome. I know what you're thinking. I'm sucking up in case an ump reads this. Well, I'm not above tossing out a compliment to get a call, but I'm not buttering anyone up. I can tell you of one umpire who was just an old, crabby, lousy excuse for an ump. This guy was unapproachable and an egotistical jerk. He would call foul balls by using his foot to signal. He was so cool he didn't need to motion with his arm. And MLB let him get away with that stuff. No longer. Breaking up the umps' union and combining N.L. and A.L. umps into one pool went a long way in improving player-umpire relations.

OK, so Bob Davidson misses a call on a Carlos Delgado homer at Yankee Stadium. After the game, he admitted, yep, I missed it. As players, that's all we can ask. All we want are guys giving their best effort, making sure they're in position and doing whatever they can to make the best call. Umps feel bad when they miss calls. I know guys have had umps apologize for blowing a call. Yet I've never heard a player say, "Well, you dumb-dumb, you cost me the game." What do you say after an ump admits his mistake? You tell them it's OK and move on. Umps never have made fun of me for hanging a curve and giving up a walkoff jack.

Now comes news about instant replay being considered. Good umps would welcome it for home run calls and foul and fair calls. Their goal is to get the call right, and any ump who thinks he never needs help is a lousy ump.

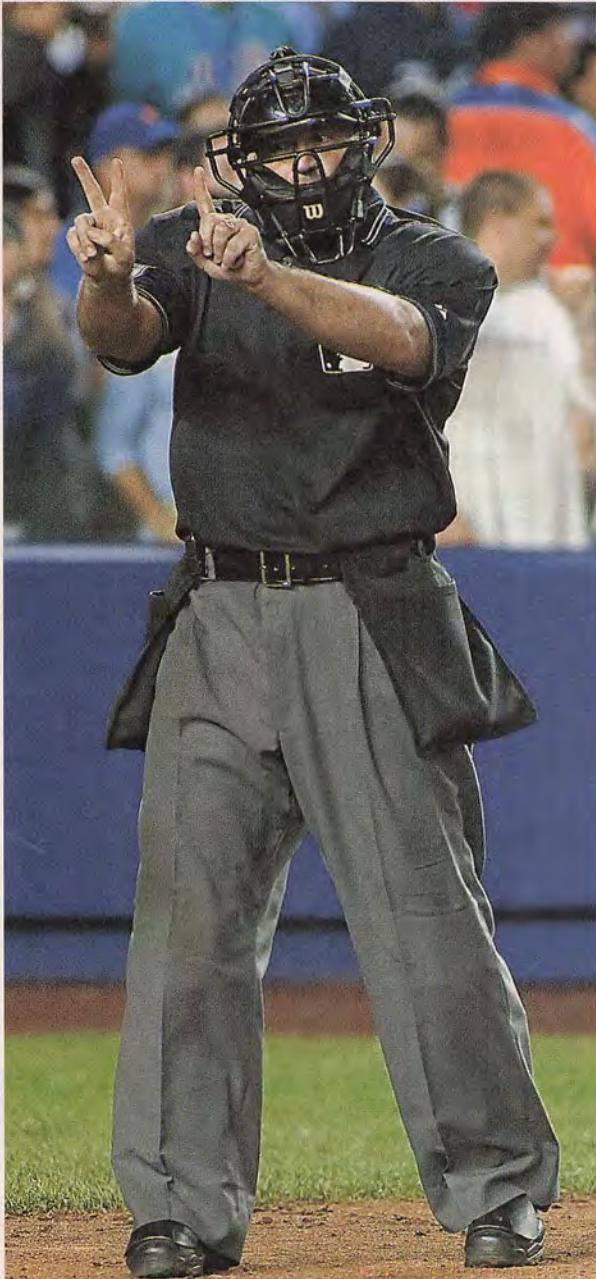
Replay will happen. The problem will be deciding how to use it. How many times can a call be checked? Will replay be considered only after the fifth inning? Just for playoff games?

One place where replay should never be used: calling balls and strikes. Umps wouldn't want that, and you can't blame

them. They make 250 split-second decisions every game, and they're going to miss their share. But that's the human element, and really, that makes the game great.

Besides, if I need every call to go my way, I'm not a very good pitcher. If I'm confident enough to make another great pitch, there's no reason to go off on an ump if he blows one.

Well, the next time I face Jim Thome or Albert Pujols, I might like to strike that last comment.



Tony Randazzo and his umpiring brethren usually get it right.

The week ahead

May 30-June 1

Vendetta's victims

Milton Bradley had a rough split last year from Oakland—the A's didn't think he could be a full-time player any longer. Bradley, 30, now with the Rangers, has taken out his frustration on the field, hitting .368 with a .684 slugging percentage in 19 at-bats this season against the A's. He gets a chance to strike again in a series at Texas.

Fish fry

Phillies slugger Ryan Howard should be excited. Howard has punished Florida pitching, and the Marlins will be playing at Citizens Bank Park. Howard has 13 homers, 33 RBIs and a .681 slugging percentage in 144 career at-bats against the Marlins. Teammate Chase Utley has 14 homers, 53 RBIs and a .604 slugging percentage in 230 at-bats.

Wrong-way clubs

Safeco Field will have an air of disappointment when Detroit and Seattle tangle. Both clubs fell well below expectations during the first two months, and the shared experience included lousy starting pitching. Entering the week, the Tigers' rotation ranked last in the A.L. in ERA (5.40) and the Mariners' starters were next-to-last (5.31).

June 2-4

Well-traveled

Arizona starts a three-city, 10-game trip at Milwaukee. At journey's end, the Diamondbacks will have played 17 of 23 games on the road, which has been hard on the offense. Four D-backs regulars—Eric Byrnes, Mark Reynolds, Justin Upton and Chris Young—are hitting below .200 on the road.

June 3-5

June swoon?

Tampa Bay's mettle will be tested in June. The Rays play 13 of their first 16 games against teams that led their divisions heading into this week, and that includes a series at Boston. Red Sox knuckleballer Tim Wakefield is 19-3 with a 3.16 ERA against the Rays. —Gerry Fraley

SCOUTS VIEWS

Observations and opinions from major league scouts

Need over talent? Tampa Bay must decide

The Rays have the No. 1 pick for the second consecutive year. A National League personnel director expects Tampa Bay to draft according to need rather than choose the best available player.

According to the executive, Rays scouting director R.J. Harrison is being pressured to take Florida State catcher Buster Posey. Catcher is, by far, the thinnest position in Tampa Bay's beefed-up player development system. The club wants someone ready to take over by the time it expects to become an unquestioned contender.

Drafting according to need can be a mistake, especially when the position is catcher, the N.L. executive says. History shows more draft mistakes are made on catchers than any other position.

Collegiate catchers are particularly difficult to gauge. The last one selected in the first round who has had a significant major league career was Georgia Tech's Jason Varitek, taken by the Mariners in 1994. Two college catchers—Robbie Wine (Astros) and Terry Bell (Mariners)—were chosen ahead of Roger Clemens in 1983.

If this executive had the top pick, he would snap up high school shortstop Tim Beckham of Griffin, Ga.

"He's another Upton," he says, referring to outfielders Justin of the Diamondbacks and B.J. of the Rays. "He's a legitimate five-tool player. He's got that electricity. For me, he's too good to pass up." —Gerry Fraley



Posey

Piazza couldn't throw 'em out, but he sure could hit 'em out

Coming from a player who never hid from the spotlight, Mike Piazza's retirement announcement last week was rather anticlimactic.

In a statement released through his agent, Piazza officially hung up his spikes (he had not played this season) and joined the Hall of Fame class of 2013. If offensive production were all that mattered, Piazza would be a no-doubt selection. He authored some of the best offensive seasons ever turned in by a catcher—especially 1997, when he hit .362 with 40 home runs and 124 RBIs for the Dodgers.

Piazza, who amazingly was a 62nd-round draft choice, owns the career record for most homers hit as a catcher, 396, though some would argue that he stayed behind the plate solely to chase the record long after he should have moved to first base. The night he broke Carlton Fisk's record—Piazza did it as a New York Met in 2004—it was reported that Piazza joked to manager Art Howe,

"Get me to first base. I'm tired of catching."

And his critics were tired of watching him behind the plate. Never one to be mentioned in Gold Glove discussions, Piazza's inability to slow down the other team's running game—opponents stole bases against him at an 80.4 percent rate—was a constant burden. In the end, though, Piazza's offensive abilities—he was a .308 career hitter and had 427 homers overall—more than offset his defensive liabilities. He will be deemed worthy of entry into the Hall, almost certainly on the first ballot.

What an interesting vote that could be. On one hand, you have Piazza and Craig Biggio, two self-made stars without a whiff of the performance-enhancing stench attached, becoming eligible. Also coming up in 2013 will be Roger Clemens, Barry Bonds and Sammy Sosa (assuming none play this year)—and they'll prompt plenty of second-guessing by voters. —Ryan Fagan

Piazza's .308 average and 427 homers meant acknowledging the fans' appreciation often.

Teams will wade into a reasonably deep pool

The consensus of four scouting directors is that this is an above-average draft in terms of depth. The corner infielders are strong, and the pool of lefthanded pitchers is better than normal.

Vanderbilt's Pedro Alvarez is the top third baseman and, in some quarters, considered the best player overall. An American League scouting director calls Alvarez "a real No. 3 hitter" whose bat makes up for below-average speed and the fact he's a Scott Boras "advisee."

There also is an abundance of first basemen, which creates a quandary.

"It's hard to lock on a first baseman as your draft bell cow," an N.L. scouting director says. "They've got power and *probably* will play, but I want more than *probably* with my first pick."

The drawbacks with most first basemen are a lack of athleticism and inability to play another spot. According to the scouting directors, only one first base prospect could be expected to change positions: Eric Hosmer, an athletic high school player from Plantation, Fla. They rate Miami's Yonder Alonso ahead of South Carolina's Justin Smoak among collegiate first basemen.

"The guy from Miami is for real," the A.L. scouting director says. "For me, Smoak is no sure thing."

"As a scout, you better believe that your first baseman either has plus-plus power to go with a plus bat or a plus-plus bat to go with plus power. Some 'new age' managers want a glove over there, but for me it's bat first." —G.F.



Alvarez



(RUMOR OF THE WEEK)

If Maddux packs his bags, he won't go far

It's still spring, but it sure seems that hope has long left Petco Park in San Diego. The team is suffering through one of those meltdown seasons in which the best player (in this case, Jake Peavy) gets hurt, the elder stalwart (Trevor Hoffman) finally breaks down and the big gambles (Jim Edmonds and Tadahito Iguchi) fail to pay off.

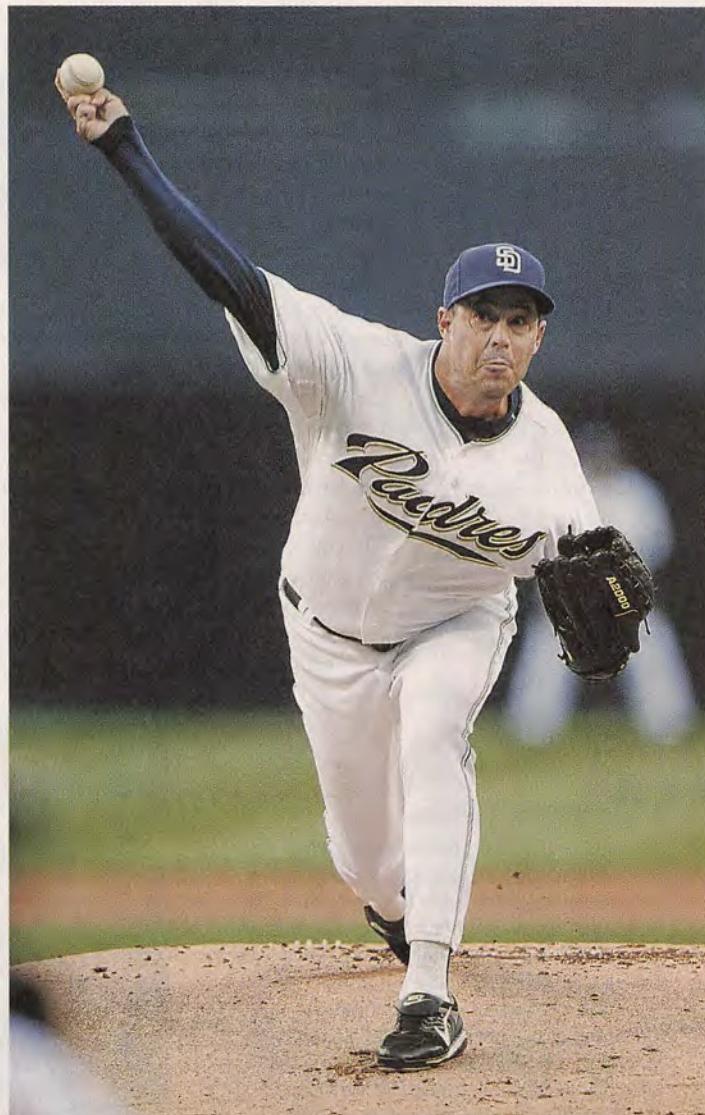
This sort of thing always attracts the attention of the rumor mill because the thought is that the team in the midst of a hopeless year would be best off looking to deal any of today's useful parts in exchange for more hope tomorrow.

The Padres happen to have one of the most useful parts in baseball history—350-game winner Greg Maddux, who, at age 42, still has a mastery of the strike zone and is carrying himself like a guy 15 years younger. He still slides that sharp-moving fastball around the corners, and umpires still give him the benefit of the doubt. As long as he has those positives, he is useful in the big leagues and a target for the many pitching-starved clubs vying for playoff spots.

But, a scout says, there are two things keeping Maddux from being elsewhere at this point.

First is Maddux himself. He is happy in Southern California and has little desire to leave—which is important because Maddux would have to waive his no-trade clause in order to be traded. At this point, he is willing to suffer with the Padres rather than pack up and head for, say, Philadelphia or Houston. Or even to the Cubs, for that matter. He won't go to the American League, so the West Coast is not exactly teeming with possibilities. If he wants to play for a California N.L. team with a shot at a World Series, the only choice would be a return to the Dodgers.

The second thing keeping Maddux in San Diego is the Padres. They would certainly move Maddux, especially if he expressed eagerness to go. But, absent a bidding war, teams are not going to give up much for a 42-year-old corner painter, no matter the



Maddux will want to keep his 3.76 ERA on the West Coast.

resume. In this case, because Maddux can be a free agent after the season, the Padres would be better off letting him leave then (they would get a compensatory draft pick) than taking a middling prospect.

According to the rumor mill, that means Maddux should be in one of two places come August: still pitching for San Diego or up the road, working in Dodger blue. —S.D.

3 UP ▲

1 Ryan Howard

It's easy to forget how enjoyable it is to watch Howard when he's dialed in. Mired in the .170 range most of the season, the Phillies slugger has hit .309 with eight homers and 17 RBIs since May 10. That hasn't helped the team much, though—the Phils are just 6-8 during the stretch.

2 Jered Weaver

The Angels' lanky righthander is hitting his stride after an erratic start. He's 2-0 with a 0.89 ERA in his past three starts and has given up nine hits and struck out 19 in 20½ innings.

3 Frank Thomas

There was almost no doubt the Toronto castoff would wind up on the Up side of this list at some point, and here he is after batting .421 with four homers for the A's last week.

3 DOWN ▼

1 Wilfredo Ledezma

Not to pile on the Padres, but the guy they picked to fill the hole Jake Peavy (elbow) left in the rotation is 0-2 with an 11.57 ERA in his two starts as a replacement.

2 Royals

Being no-hit by Jon Lester highlighted their recent troubles at the plate. They're hitting just .222 and have scored more than three runs only twice in their past eight games—the No. 2 hitter, Mark Grudzielanek, has zero RBIs in his past 20 games (74 at-bats).

3 Diamondbacks

The D-backs are hitting an anemic .184 in their past seven games. Of course, playing in the N.L. West makes that less of an issue—they lost just two games off their division lead.

—Ryan Fagan

David Ragan ran into plenty of people on his way to the top. One thing rubbed off on him quickly: He learned how to apologize.

On the fast track to success—and respect

By Kenny Bruce

The second race of his Cup career barely in the books, David Ragan found himself being chastised by veteran drivers for his actions on the track. Concerns were strong enough that NASCAR didn't allow him to compete in the Cup race the next week at Atlanta.

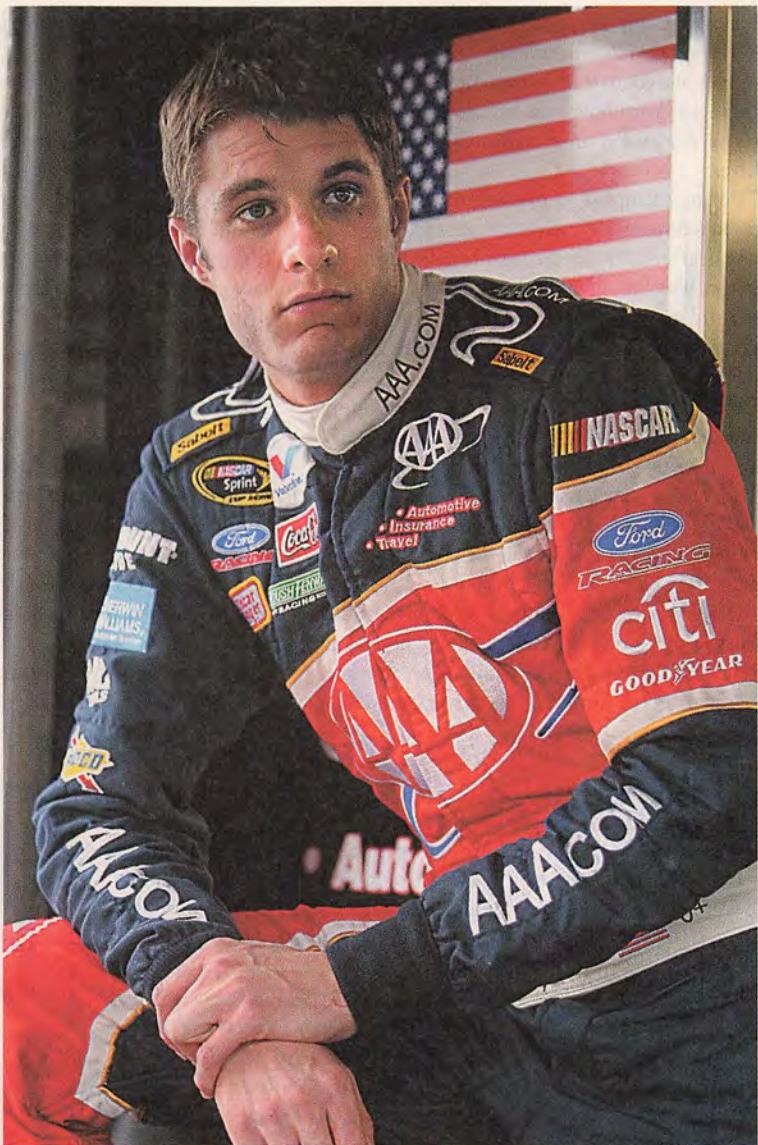
Though Ragan made it through all 500 laps in his second start, the fall race at Martinsville in 2006, he didn't make any friends.

"The best thing would have been to black flag the 06 and park him for the rest of the day and save half the cautions," Tony Stewart said, comparing Ragan, then 20, to "a dart with no feathers."

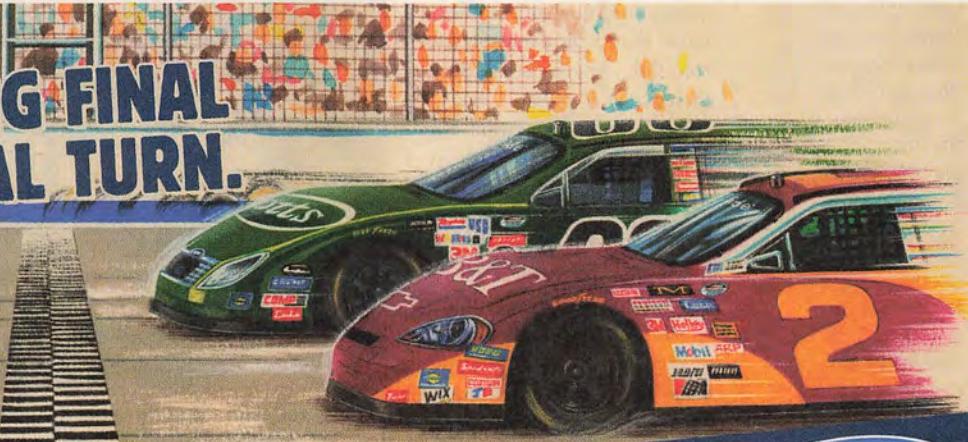
Tony Raines, driving at the time for Hall of Fame Racing, was a bit more diplomatic though no less forgiving.

"He had a bad day," Raines said of Ragan. "He ran into a lot of people, so I guess I shouldn't feel

Ragan was a little wide-eyed when he started out, but he's looking calmer all the time.



**THERE'S NOTHING FINAL
ABOUT THE FINAL TURN.**



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singled out. You just need to iron that stuff out before you get into this series."

"He's just got to learn how to race, and this isn't where you learn how to race," said Ken Schrader, whose day ended after contact with the young driver.

Ragan attempted to make amends, apologizing to Schrader for their incident and later bidding nearly \$6,000 for the right to ride during the prerace with Stewart at a subsequent event. Ragan also did the two best things any young driver can do outside a racecar—he listened and he learned.

Now, one-third of the way into the 2008 Sprint Cup season, Ragan is still learning. But his mistakes have dwindled and his confidence has risen. Through 12 races, Ragan has two top five finishes and three top 10s—those numbers equal his totals for all of 2007—and is 13th in the points, one spot out of the Chase.

Credit car owner Jack Roush for his staunch belief in the young driver's talent. Credit veteran crew chief Jimmy Fennig, who has an uncanny ability to get the most out of a driver. And credit

Ragan, who has settled down to become a smarter, more patient pupil.

"Anything you can do twice you should learn from your first time and do a little better job, and the bottom line is everything is easier," Ragan says of his team's improvement.

"A year ago, we would eventually be fast and I would be comfortable and I would run good lap times, but it was probably 100 miles to go in the race and it was a little bit too late. We've been qualifying a lot better, so we've had better track position, better pit stall selection. So everything has seemed to happen a little easier and a little smoother."

And because of that experience, he says, there are fewer surprises and fewer situations that he hasn't found himself in before. "I know what's around the next corner," he says.

Ragan is a second-generation racer—his father, Ken, logged 50 career Cup starts between 1983 and 1990, with a best finish of 11th at Talladega in 1984.

As he prepares to eclipse his father's career starts mark, Ragan says he's slowly earning the respect of

those he competes against each week.

"Just wrecking less and being around more (helps)," he says. "They know your face and who you are. Hanging out with them more in the garage and also running the Nationwide Series helps a lot. Anytime you can get experience racing with your fellow competitors, they kind of get a feeling on how you're going to race them, and then I get a feeling on how other people are going to race me."

The result is a little more give and take in the close quarters of the racetrack. A bit more trust. And, under the right circumstances, improved performance.

"It certainly goes both ways," he says, "but I do get a little more respect out there."

"I've certainly got a long ways to go, but we're on the right track. We've just got to keep doing the right things and eventually we'll be where we need to be."

SN

Kenny Bruce is assistant managing editor for NASCAR Scene. Read more from Bruce at scenedaily.com.

Speedreads

Kevin Harvick needs to rediscover what the new car needs or he'll be shuffled out of Chase contention. It looked like he had something early on, but it has been a major struggle for him lately.

With Humpy Wheeler (Lowe's Motor Speedway) now retired, Eddie Gossage (Texas) moves to No. 1 in the track promoters poll. Big shoes to fill, but Gossage can do it.

If you're not driving for Jack Roush, Richard Childress, Rick Hendrick or Joe Gibbs, you're a NASCAR plebeian.
—Roger Kuznia

Joey Logano will make his long-awaited Nationwide Series debut this weekend at Dover. He will drive the No. 20 for Joe Gibbs Racing. Logano turned 18 last week, making him eligible to drive in NASCAR's top three series. Despite the pressure of getting behind the wheel of a prolific winner—**Tony Stewart**, **Kyle Busch** and **Denny Hamlin** have driven the No. 20 to six Nationwide wins in 13 races—Logano is happy to drive a contender. "I'd rather be in a car that's winning races, and I know I can win races, rather than a car that's going to run 25th," Logano says. "Sure, there's a lot of pressure, but I'd rather be running up front. I've been waiting for this birthday forever." > So, will there be a Cup race at Kentucky Speedway in 2009? NASCAR is saying no; **Bruton Smith** is saying yes. Smith's Speedway Motorsports Inc. entered into an agreement last week to purchase the track in Sparta, and Smith says he expects to have a Cup race there next year. SMI owns seven other tracks that host 12 Cup races—Atlanta, Bristol, Las Vegas, Lowe's, New Hampshire, Texas and Infineon. "He will bring a race there next year," says **Jerry Carroll**,

INSIDE DISH



Let him eat cake—and drive our car: Logano (center) celebrated with J.D. (left) and Joe Gibbs.

whose ownership group sold Kentucky Speedway to SMI. "I do not have any idea where it's coming from, but when he tells me he would bring a race—we would not have done this deal if we did not think Bruton was going to bring a race." Kentucky Speedway is a regular stop in the Nationwide and Craftsman

Truck Series. More than 70,000 fans attended last year's Nationwide Series race at the track. >

J.D. Gibbs, president of Joe Gibbs Racing, insists there has been no decision on where Stewart will race in 2009. "We are just working through the process with him again," Gibbs says. "The same thing we talked about before—he has other options out there, and he'll always have a lot of opportunities. Right now we're focused on him in (Gibbs' No. 20 Cup) car for this year and next year. We'll ride that out." Stewart acknowledged he has offers to drive from organizations that would include an ownership stake. Haas CNC Racing has been

among the teams mentioned. Stewart says he has gotten further along in the process, but nothing has been finalized. His contract runs through next season.

He speaks the language

Q&A

Country
music star
Darryl Worley

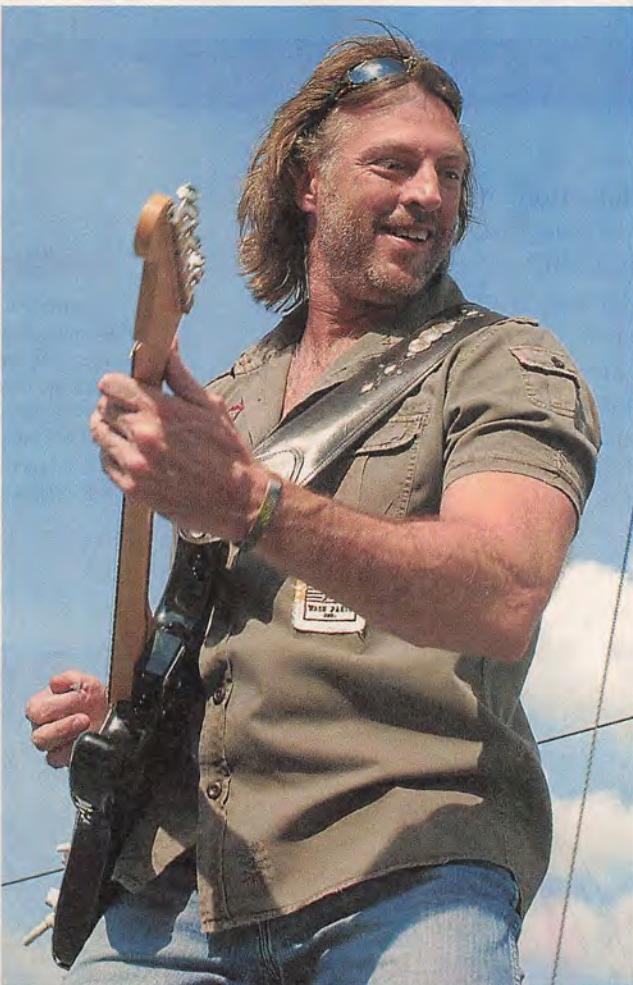
Darryl Worley is as comfortable at a NASCAR race as he is singing one of his three chart-topping country music singles "I Miss My Friend," "Have You Forgotten?" and "Awful, Beautiful Life." But Worley is more than a singing gearhead.

A native of Pyburn, Tenn., Worley, 43, also has a degree in organic chemistry from the University of North Alabama and was successful in the chemical industry before giving the music business his full attention.

Worley sang the national anthem before the start of last Sunday's Coca-Cola 600 NASCAR Sprint Cup race at Lowe's Motor Speedway. He was at LMS earlier this month shooting a video with driver Carl Edwards when SPORTING NEWS caught up with him.

SN: Have you always been a NASCAR fan?

Worley: We were going to NASCAR events when there was just a smattering of people in the stands. I had to convince all my buddies around home



Worley liked racing before he was country, which means he was NASCAR when NASCAR wasn't all that cool.

that NASCAR races were cool. Before you knew it, I had about 50 or 60 people following me down to Talladega, and we didn't miss a race down there for about 14 years.

SN: Who was your favorite driver?

Worley: It's always been Sterling Marlin (also from Tennessee). I liked his dad (Coo Coo Marlin), too. Sterling's always been one of those really good old boys, a country guy. He talks our language, and he was pretty fast on some days. We liked to watch him race the big tracks. He's old school, and we love him.

SN: Is Edwards your new favorite driver?

Worley: I don't know. We'll see. But he's an amazing young man and a super talent. It's hard to pick 'em nowadays. There's so much hype around it all. There's so much money and advertising that goes into it that didn't used to happen. It used to be just a matter of "Come to the track and see who's the best."

SN: Every musician has a hard-times story. What was the toughest it got for you before you made it?

Worley: Me and a couple of business partners had a good business, and we were doing really well, and I had some money built up. So I said, "It's time to quit this and really give music a hundred percent and see what happens." I did that, and after a few years, the money was gone, and I was struggling. I had just landed my first songwriting gig, but it only paid like \$150 a week. What it boils down to is about 15 years of digging and scrounging and pinching pennies and trying to make something happen. —Reid Spencer

Mobil 1

Put some NASCAR in your car with Mobil 1. The official motor oil of NASCAR and the #77 Mobil 1 Dodge Team.

Official Motor Oil of **NASCAR**

Pit Box

Sponsored by
Mobil 1

Who will win at Dover?

1:30 p.m. ET Sunday, FOX

NASCAR experts Roger Kuznia and Reid Spencer size up the upcoming race—and each other's analysis—every week in the Pit Box. This week: the Best Buy 400.

Roger: It has been a largely disappointing season for Matt Kenseth, but Dover is his place to shine. The site of his Cup debut nearly 10 years ago, the Monster Mile has been among Kenseth's best tracks—he has a win and 10 top 10s there. I like the 490 laps he has led there dating to 2005—including a race-high 192 last September before his engine blew.

Reid: Jeff Gordon already had three wins at Dover when Kenseth was still knee-high to a short grasshopper, and if anyone needs a win, it's the four-time Cup champion. True, Gordon hasn't won at the Monster Mile since 2001, but he finished ninth and 11th there last year in the first two races at the track in the new car. I look for a breakout week for the Hendrick veteran.

What y'all need to know

When explaining this crucial dynamic and other ins and outs of the hotly debated

Amid the constant bellyaching from drivers about the Car of Tomorrow, it seems that a refresher course—maybe even an introductory course—on the object of everyone's attention is in order. And Diandra Leslie-Pelecky is just the person to give it. In the recently published book *The Physics of NASCAR*, Leslie-Pelecky writes in language that sports fans can understand—and explains the ins and outs of NASCAR's new car.

Center of gravity

Relative to the old car, the new car's center of gravity is higher. And that has made a huge difference in handling. Drivers have complained the new car doesn't turn well. The higher the center of gravity, the more grip shifts from the inside wheels to the outside wheels in a turn. Less grip on the inside wheels makes it harder for the car to turn.

Yaw

This is the hottest topic in the NASCAR garage. A car is "yawed" when it is pointed in one direction but headed in another. Carl Edwards' team has mastered this; his car looks as if it's sideways, even down the straightaway. Yaw is important because air hits the car differently when the car is at an angle to the oncoming air than when it hits the air head-on. In effect, the car has a head start on turns because it is yawed before it enters the turn. Yaw puts the car in a position so the air helps the car turn.

Splitter

The splitter runs the width of the car under the front bumper. It is made of 100 pieces of high-tech fabric laminated together. One piece looks like space-age lattice. One hundred pieces laminated together make a half-inch-thick shelf that creates downforce.



Tires

Tires will always be controversial. Drivers want tires soft enough to grip the track but not so soft that they wear out quickly. Many drivers talk about taking care of their tires. That means they drive less aggressively to make the tire last longer. After just a few laps, tire wear can cost a car a couple of tenths of a second per lap. That might not sound like much, but it is.

about YAW

Car of Tomorrow, NASCAR physics really need not be rocket science



Carl Edwards and the No. 99 team might understand the physics of NASCAR better than anyone.

Wing

The wing is made of carbon fiber composite. It generates drag and downforce. Drag acts like a parachute; downforce pushes the car onto the track. The new car has a lot less downforce than the old car, which means less grip, which means the car is harder to drive.

Oil lid

The car's oil reservoir sits behind the driver. Because the oil gets very hot and could splash and/or release noxious fumes, an enclosure surrounds the oil reservoir. Several times this year, the reservoir's cover has, ahem, mysteriously come off during a race.

The most famous of these was at a Las Vegas Sprint Cup race in March; race winner Carl Edwards was docked 100 points, and his crew chief, Bob Osborne, was suspended for six races and fined \$100,000. The team also was docked 100 owner points, and if Edwards makes the Chase, he will not receive the 10 bonus points for winning the race.

Why such a fierce penalty? The absence of that lid improves a car's ability to stick to the ground, which makes it much easier to drive. Here's how: With the lid in place, air travels under and into the car, stopping at the lid. That exerts upforce on the car. Take away the lid and the air disperses throughout the cockpit. The downforce remains the same, but the upforce has decreased; therefore, the car sticks to the ground better and has more grip. Upforce (aka lift) vs. downforce is a key equation for the car. Think of it as a tug of war—if you're pulling with 50 pounds and I'm pulling with 40 pounds, you're winning by 10 pounds.

IMPAXX Energy Absorbing Foam

It's foam, but it's not foamy at all. The light-blue material is hard: If you hit it on a table, it bangs. The foam covers the doors on both sides of the car. The secret to its success is that it absorbs energy on impact instead of squishing and then springing back out.

As told to Matt Crossman

The pictures we better see this fall: Matt Leinart and Vince Young maturing and improving as quarterbacks.

Show us what you've got—on the field

By Clifton Brown

cliftonbrown@sportingnews.com

For young quarterbacks like Matt Leinart of the Cardinals and Vince Young of the Titans, life is not always picture-perfect.

Both players have been recent victims of this snapshot age, where things done in public or private can become Internet fodder. Pictures of Leinart partying with several young ladies in a hot tub found their way onto websites. So did pictures of a shirtless Young, partying and drinking from a bottle at an Austin nightclub.

To make any assumptions about Leinart's or Young's work ethic, based on a few pictures, is unfair. However, it's not unfair to say Leinart and Young have reached a pivotal point in their NFL careers.

Both have thrown more interceptions than touchdown passes. And neither Young nor Leinart has been better than Jay Cutler of the Broncos, a quarterback taken later (No. 11) than both Young (No. 3) and Leinart (No. 10) in the 2006 draft.

At this point, Leinart has more to prove than Young. Leinart's career will be headed in the wrong direction if he fails to secure the starting job this season. Kurt Warner will turn 37 in June. He played well last season, but his best days have passed. This should be Leinart's time.

Word from Arizona is that Leinart is working hard on his footwork, studying film, lifting weights. He'd better be. Cardinals coach Ken Whisenhunt will give Leinart only what he earns. Not only does Whisenhunt need to win, he has no reason for blind loyalty to Leinart because he was not the coach when Leinart was drafted.

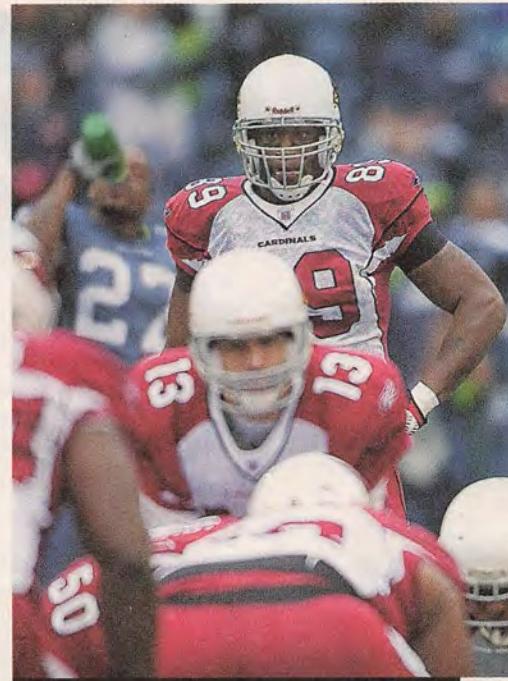
Leinart was limited to just five games in 2007 because of a broken collarbone. That hampered his progress. But even before the injury, Leinart was struggling. His completion percentage, yards per completion and quarterback rating were all lower than in his rookie season.

Because Leinart does not have overwhelming arm strength, he must improve his throwing accuracy and ability to read defenses. The Cardinals

already have franchise receivers in Larry Fitzgerald and Anquan Boldin. It is time for Leinart to play more like a franchise quarterback.

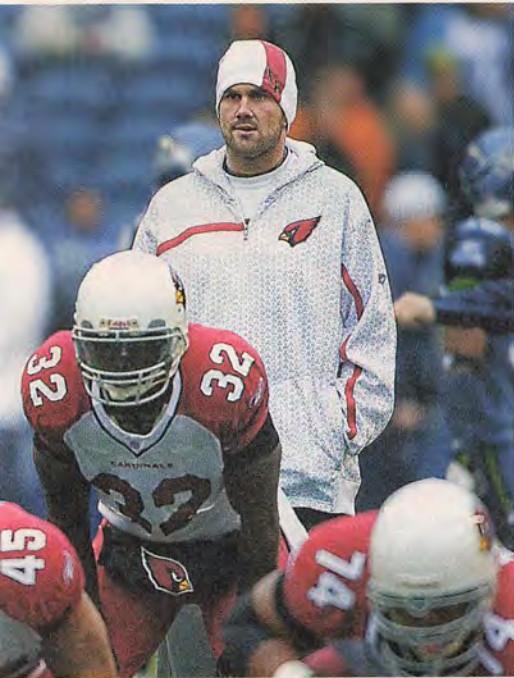
It is harder to criticize Young because he has been a winning quarterback with the Titans. However, if coach Jeff Fisher were satisfied with Young's development, he would not have fired offensive coordinator Norm Chow and replaced him with Mike Heimerdinger.

The Titans made the playoffs last season, and Young has shown leadership qualities that motivate teammates, plus an ability to make game-winning plays with his arm and legs. But Young is coming



Leinart (far right) and Young (below) enter their third seasons with much at stake. Somehow, both need to become more accurate throwers.





off a season in which he threw nine touchdown passes and 17 interceptions. The Titans ranked 22nd in the NFL in scoring, and there is a reason their kicker, Rob Bironas, went to the Pro Bowl. Once the Titans reached the red zone, they had trouble reaching the end zone.

The Titans had 543 rushing attempts last season, more than any other team in the NFL. Their offense needs more balance for them to make the leap from playoff team to Super Bowl team. Yet, their decisions to draft running back Chris Johnson in the first round and not to draft a receiver until the fourth round are telling. It means the Titans still plan to emphasize the running game, featuring LenDale White and Johnson. It also means the team is not convinced Young is ready to carry more of the offense.

Merril Hoge, an NFL analyst for ESPN, has gained a reputation as a Vince Young basher. But Hoge is not about to back off on Young—or Leinart.

"It's not about me liking, or not liking, Vince Young personally," says Hoge. "Vince Young is not an accurate thrower, and I've never seen a quarterback who was not very accurate become very accurate."

Leinart is a guy who played on teams that always had superior talent in college. Now that's no longer the case, and his weaknesses are being exposed. I wouldn't have drafted either one in the first round."

Eli Manning silenced many critics in 2007, and Young and Leinart can still do the same. However, the upcoming season, not Internet photos, will give us a much clearer picture as to where both quarterbacks are headed.

SN

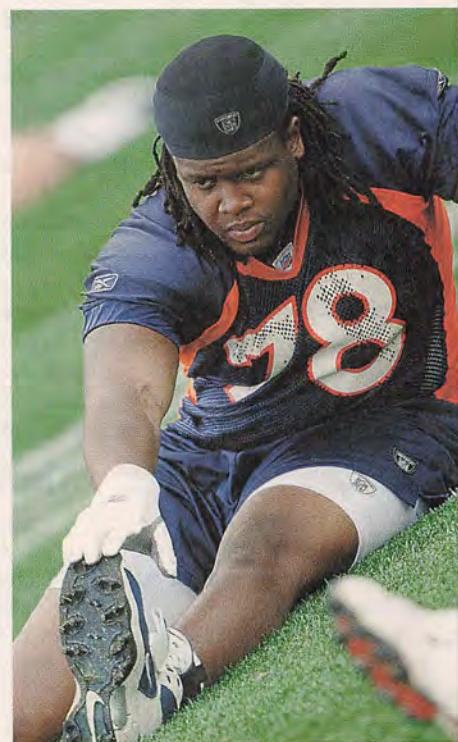
The Cowboys' search for a dependable No. 2 receiver might be solved by **Terry Glenn**. After missing all but the team's last two games because of a knee injury, Glenn is optimistic about being ready for training camp. He wanted to participate in team activities in

May, but the Cowboys held him out, not wanting to risk a setback. Glenn topped 1,000 yards receiving in 2005 and '06, and at anything close to 100 percent, he would be a dangerous complement to **Terrell Owens**. The keys for Glenn, 33: getting through training camp healthy and proving to the Cowboys he can be part of their plans. ➤ Oakland signed free-agent SS **Gibril Wilson** because it hopes his ability to swoop in from the secondary to corral runners will improve its run defense. Since the beginning of the 2004 season, Wilson has more solo tackles (284) than any safety in the NFL. Having Wilson creep into the box as a run stopper will allow FS **Michael Huff** to focus on pass coverage. Wilson is 26 and Huff 25, which means the Raiders have a talented duo that can spend their prime seasons playing together. ➤ Broncos rookie LT **Ryan Clady** has quickly earned a new nickname, "Sweet Feet," because of the fancy footwork he has shown during minicamp. Clady, the 12th pick in the draft, already is penciled in as the starter to replace retired **Matt Lepis**. Clady's athletic ability has already convinced the Broncos they made a wise choice in the first round. ➤ Whether the Texans can become legitimate playoff contenders may depend on the health of WR **Andre Johnson**. It was not good news that Johnson recently needed arthroscopic surgery on the same left knee that sidelined him last season from Weeks 3 through 9. Johnson is one of the league's most complete receivers, a superb intermediate route runner and a deep threat. The Texans are not the same team without him, and they hope this latest procedure keeps the knee sound once the rigors of training camp begin. ➤ **Joe Horn** wants

the Falcons to trade him, but there may not be a demand for a 36-year-old receiver with a \$2.5 million contract. The Falcons have younger WRs **Roddy White**, **Laurent Robinson** and **Michael Jenkins**, and because the team is in rebuilding mode, Horn

would not mind being dealt to a contender. He is not expected to attend any voluntary offseason workouts.

>INSIDE DISH



It's not a stretch to say the Broncos like what they've seen so far from Clady.

 **ONLINE EXCLUSIVE**

Keep up with the latest offseason news at sportingnews.com.

speedreads

Bills star left tackle Jason Peters may skip mandatory minicamp. You guessed it—he wants more money. But you know what? This guy deserves it.

First the Browns traded cornerback Leigh Bodden, then cornerback Daven Holly blew out his knee. How long before the Browns call free-agent cornerback Ty Law?

The Falcons just gave Matt Ryan \$34.75 million in guaranteed money. After the Michael Vick experience, you'd think owner Arthur Blank would be a little more gun-shy about giving big money to a quarterback.

Q&A Damage control

Matt Schaub enters Year 2 in Houston with a much better idea of how to cope with a long, cruel season

Matt Schaub's first season as a starter after being traded by the Falcons was anything but smooth. He missed five games, left four other games early because of injuries and watched Sage Rosenfels emerge as a threat to take the starting job by going 4-1 in Schaub's absence. But as soon as the season ended, Texans coach Gary Kubiak snuffed a potential controversy by announcing Schaub would remain the team's starter.

Now, the coaches are counting on Schaub, who will work on how to take hits better while continuing his recovery from offseason surgery on his nonthrowing shoulder, to prove why they have so much faith in him.

SN: How much did it help your confidence when Kubiak named you the 2008 starter right away?

SCHAUB: It's definitely a confidence booster to know your coach has that confidence in you. You always need two quarterbacks in this league to get through a season. Sage went in there and played really well. We support each other and are really good friends. But to have that confidence instilled in you right from the get-go is huge.

SN: Because Rosenfels played so well last year, does that put extra pressure on you?

SCHAUB: I don't know about pressure. But it's competition. That's just the way the game is. We embrace that. We like that. In this business, you can never settle or get too comfortable in your position because that's when someone will sneak up and take your spot. Embrace the competition and keep going.

SN: What did you learn in your first year as a starter?

SCHAUB: It's a grueling, long season. As a backup, you don't really get a full sense of it because you're not out there every day mentally just drilling yourself on the game plan, going through the reps and then going out there on Sundays and trying to play consistently for 16 or 17 weeks. It's a marathon of a season. And I had to go through that with an injury and missing

some time. It's something that now I know what it takes—how to prepare and how to withstand that season.

SN: How did you chill out after the season?

SCHAUB: I didn't. I had surgery. After that, I got married and went on my honeymoon.

SN: What's the biggest thing you're working on this offseason?

SCHAUB: Getting myself healthy. Rehabbing my shoulder and getting to work out again. I'm just focusing on that side of things.

SN: After the Texans finished 8-8 last season, do you sense higher expectations and a different attitude?

SCHAUB: I can't say there are different expectations because we always expect to play and finish at a high level. But, obviously, after we finished with the best record this organization has ever had, people outside can see, "They are on their way." We are only a few wins away from reaching the level we want to get to year in and year out. We are starting to realize we are so

close and just a few plays away from reaching that goal.

SN: How tough was it to go 8-8 and still finish last in your division?

SCHAUB: I look at it differently than other people. I like it because week in and week out you're going to be playing against tough competition. There are going to be some fierce Sunday afternoons when you're going against the Colts, Titans and Jaguars. Every game means that much more. So I actually think it makes it more fun. It makes it more exciting to know that every week those lights go on, it means something.

SN: What do you need to do to close the gap in the division?

SCHAUB: Take care of the ball. Take the ball away. Improve the turnover margin. If we do that, we could have easily won two, three or maybe four more games last season. We were right in some of those games and should have won them there toward the end. But if we take care of the ball better and the defense creates a

turnover or two more, hey, we're right there in that hunt.

SN: What are your first impressions of rookie left tackle Duane Brown?

SCHAUB: Well, you know, he's a big guy. He's young and he's hungry. You can tell he wants to come in here and help us out and play at a high level. He's starting to learn how to think and react to things at this level and at this speed of play, so you can definitely sense he has the potential. Once he gets his stuff down, he will be a great player.

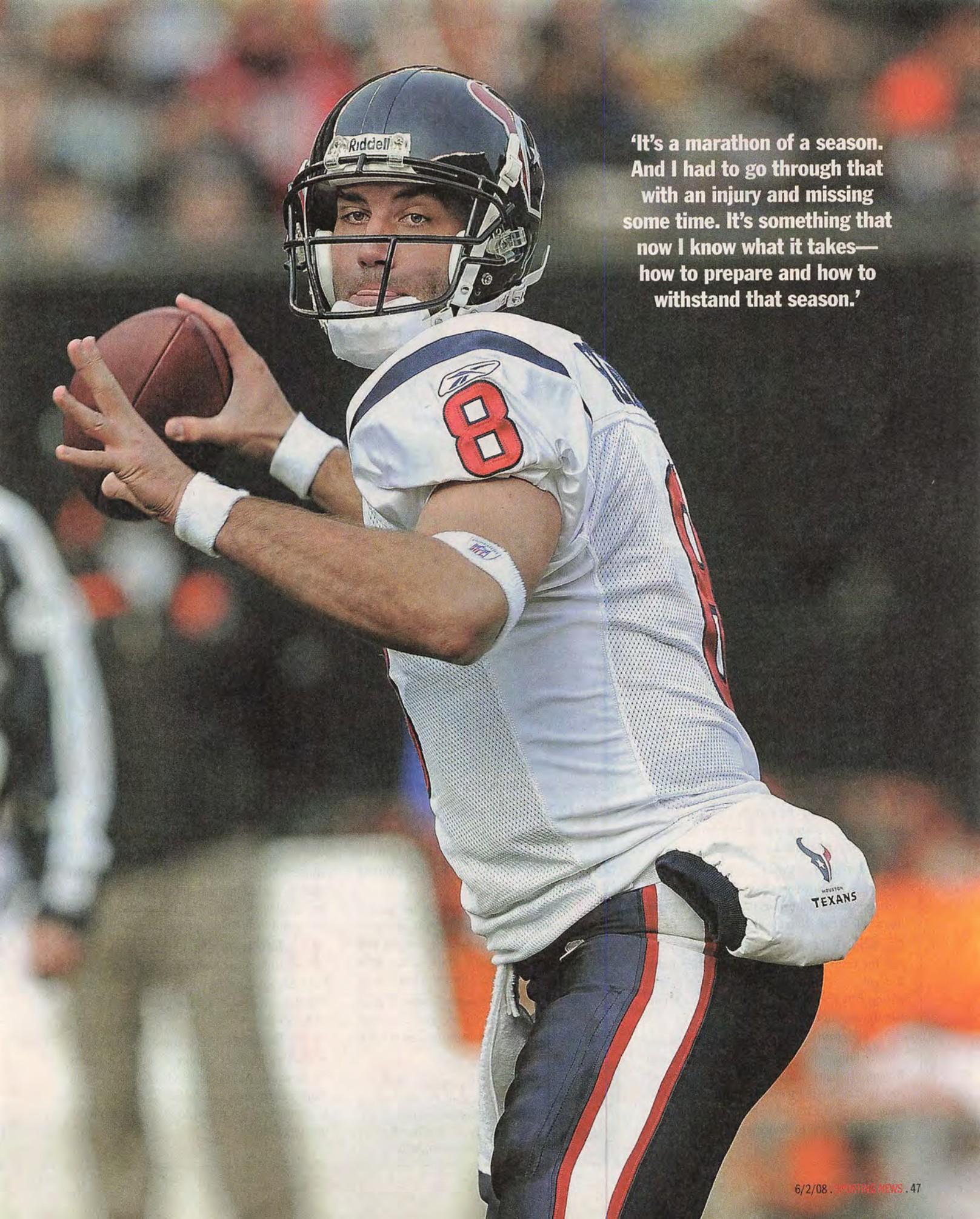
SN: Two quarterbacks from your draft class—Ben Roethlisberger and Eli Manning—have Super Bowl rings. What did you learn from watching Eli win his?

SCHAUB: You don't have to do too much. Just manage the game, trust your defense and just play the game and take what the other team gives you. Don't try to do too many things, and play smart. —Megan Manfull

The Class of '04 has numbers that count

When it comes to the NFL's favorite subject—quarterbacks—there may never be another Class of '83, but don't overlook the Class of '04. It's putting up hefty numbers in areas that mean the most: wins and championships. In fact, the '04 class already has as many Super Bowl rings as the '83ers: two. And how about that 108-78 regular-season record and 11-6 postseason mark?

	Super Bowl titles	Conf. title games	Regular-season record	Postseason record
Ben Roethlisberger, Steelers	1	2	39-16	5-2
He might make plays on the run better than any quarterback in the league, but his coaches would like him to be more patient in the pocket.				
Eli Manning, Giants	1	1	30-25	4-2
After a brilliant postseason punctuated by The Escape, he is poised to emerge as one of the league's best.				
Philip Rivers, Chargers	0	1	25-7	2-2
His reconstructed ACL should be 100 percent by the start of the season, and he'll benefit from an excellent stable of receivers—the best the Chargers have had in decades.				
J.P. Losman, Bills	0	0	10-21	0-0
Losman's shaky decision making has sent him to a backup role in what surely will be his final year in Buffalo.				
Matt Schaub, Texans	0	0	4-9	0-0
Schaub is a candidate to break out, but with Sage Rosenfels behind him, he's also a candidate for a quick benching if things don't break right.				



**'It's a marathon of a season.
And I had to go through that
with an injury and missing
some time. It's something that
now I know what it takes—
how to prepare and how to
withstand that season.'**

AFC

Focus on DEFEN

1 Steelers Nose tackle Casey Hampton's powerful lower body makes him difficult to move, and he often commands double-teams. He has good quickness and lateral movement for his size (6-0, 330). Backup Chris Hoke is a solid two-gap tackle who uses his hands well.

2 Patriots Many insiders say nose tackle Vince Wilfork, explosive in short spaces, ranks second only to Tom Brady in importance to the team. Backup Mike Wright, a hard worker, gets the most out of his talent.

3 Ravens Haloti Ngata and Kelly Gregg are two of the NFL's best run stoppers. Backup Justin Bannan would be a starter for some teams.

4 Titans All-Pro Albert Haynesworth is powerful and can get by offensive linemen because of good technique with his hands and his feet. Tony Brown is athletic and has a knack for getting to the quarterback.

5 Chargers Nose tackle Jamal Williams is among the league's best when healthy, but he has had knee problems. There is a lot of uncertainty behind him, though Ryon Bingham and Brandon McKinney are much improved.

6 Jaguars Marcus Stroud's departure hurts, but John Henderson and Rob Meier are stout against the run and top reserves Tony McDaniel and Derek Landri are promising.

7 Bills Adding Marcus Stroud, a space-eater who can stuff the run, helps. The team is hoping for a breakout year from John McCargo, who showed flashes last season.

8 Jets Slimmed-down Kris Jenkins, a three-time Pro Bowl selection in Carolina's 4-3, must transition to the nose. Backup Sione Pouha, an excellent run stuffer, will figure in heavily.

9 Chiefs If Glenn Dorsey is as disruptive as the team believes he'll be, then he'll make the entire defense better. Ron Edwards is a strong run player who comes out in obvious passing situations for Turk McBride.

10 Browns Any of five players—Shaun Smith (No. 1 on the depth chart), Shaun Rogers, Robaire Smith, Corey Williams or rookie Athyba Rubin—could line up at the nose. Coach Romeo Crennel likes versatility, and he rotates his players to keep them fresh.



Hampton, one of the AFC's best, is the immovable anchor of the Steelers' defensive line.

11 Colts Quick and athletic veteran Raheem Brock and second-year player Ed Johnson, who is agile with a low base, form an effective combo. Quinn Pitcock is the primary backup.

12 Texans Amobi Okoye is getting stronger, plus he provides a pass-rush threat. Travis Johnson, slowed by injuries, will likely start, too, and rookie Frank Okam adds the big body in the middle the team has lacked.

13 Dolphins Former Cowboys nose tackle Jason Ferguson gives the team much-needed flexibility as it transitions to a 3-4.

Randy Starks' arrival also adds depth.

14 Raiders Tommy Kelly moves inside from right end to fill the void created by Warren Sapp's retirement. Kelly and Gerard Warren are strong, fast and active players who are capable of collapsing the pocket. Terrell Sands and William Joseph are the key backups.

15 Broncos The addition of Dewayne Robertson could provide a huge boost, but there are question marks elsewhere. Marcus Thomas is gifted athletically but needs to be more consistent.

16 Bengals This is arguably the weakest and one of the more unsettled positions on the squad, but draft picks Pat Sims and Jason Shirley give it an infusion of talent and potential. Domata Peko has emerged as a mainstay with his rugged style.

TOP
5

1. Albert Haynesworth, Titans
2. Vince Wilfork, Patriots
3. Casey Hampton, Steelers
4. Jamal Williams, Chargers
5. John Henderson, Jaguars

SIVE TACKLES

NFC

1 Vikings Kevin Williams and Pat Williams have anchored the league's best rush defense the past two years. They're strong, athletic and must be double-teamed to move out of a gap. There is a lack of depth, but the team has high hopes for Fred Evans and Letroy Guion.

2 Eagles Mike Patterson quietly emerged last season. He's tremendously quick and uses leverage well. After a miserable rookie year, Brodrick Bunkley made huge strides in 2007.

3 Cowboys Jay Ratliff is a high-energy player against the run, but he's also a strong pass rusher from inside. Tank Johnson, who struggled making the switch to nose tackle last season, is working on his technique.

4 Redskins Cornelius Griffin remains a force when healthy. He can occupy several blockers on running plays and push the pocket on passing plays. Anthony Montgomery has unlimited potential but must show progress.

5 Giants Fred Robbins has the quickness to penetrate and is adept at deflecting passes. The other starter, Barry Cofield, is a run stuffer who does the dirty work.

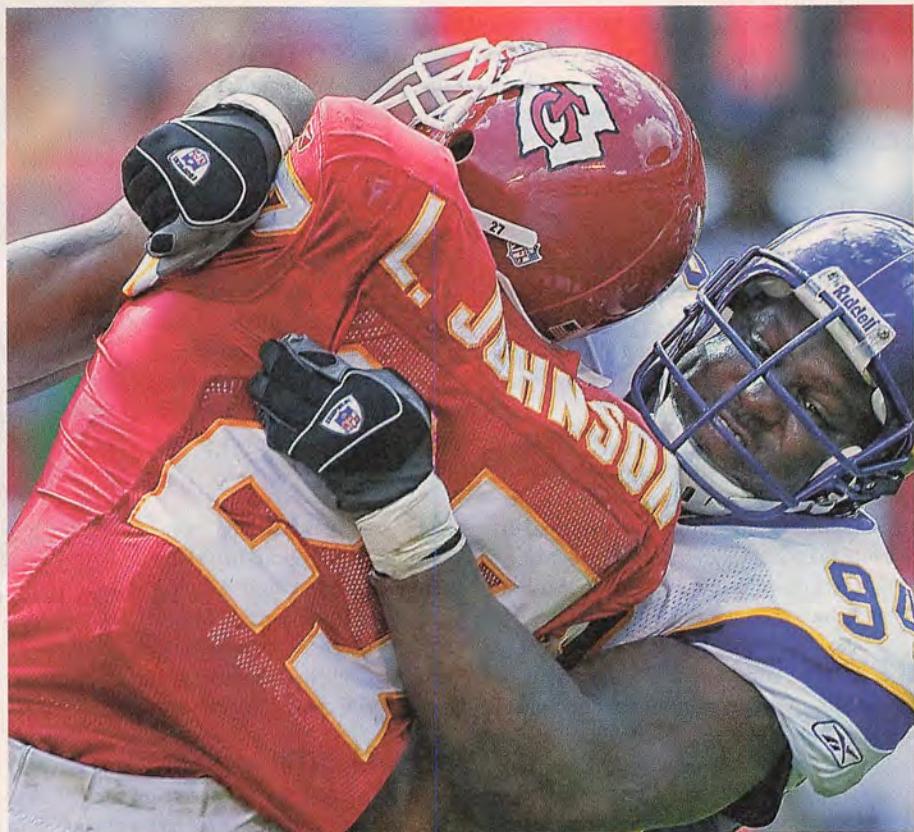
6 Bears Tommie Harris had a career-high eight sacks last season on a bad left knee. The hope is Dusty Dvoracek will anchor the spot next to a healthy Harris, but veteran Anthony Adams and rookie Marcus Harrison are ready.

7 Buccaneers Budding star Jovan Haye is a solid run stopper and exceptional pass rusher. Chris Hovan is solid. Depth has been a problem, but veteran Kevin Carter and speedy rookie Dre' Moore will push for snaps.

8 Packers The trade of Corey Williams and injuries to Johnny Jolly and Justin Harrell drive down the group's rating. Nose tackle Ryan Pickett, a valuable addition last off-season, anchors the middle.

9 Cardinals Gabe Watson, when healthy, has the bulk and strength to push the pocket from the nose position. Backup Alan Branch worked his way into regular playing time as a rookie and must continue to make progress.

10 Seahawks The past two drafts have pumped new life—and larger bodies—into the rotation: Brandon Mebane in 2007 and



The Vikings have two, count 'em, top defensive tackles named Williams: Pat (above) and Kevin.

Red Bryant in '08. The biggest question remains Marcus Tubbs, a 2004 first-round pick who has had two major knee surgeries.

11 Saints This has become a deep position with rookies Sedrick Ellis, a disruptive, athletic playmaker, and DeMario Pressley joining veterans Brian Young, Hollis Thomas, Antwan Lake and Kendrick Clancy.

12 Rams Continued improvement by second-year pros Adam Carriker and Clifton Ryan would mean the team is set. La'Roi Glover, 33, will take fewer snaps but remains an effective pass rusher.

13 Lions Cory Redding needs to rebound from a subpar season. Veteran

free agent Chuck Darby doesn't have the physical skills of departed starter Shaun Rogers, but Darby won't make the same scheme-related mistakes.

14 49ers Aubrayo Franklin improved as last season wore on. Still, the team used a first-round pick on Kentwan Balmer, who will work at left end and nose tackle.

15 Panthers Coaches are hoping some alignment changes boost production. Damione Lewis will be an "under" tackle, creating push up the middle. Massive Maake Kemoeatu (6-5, 350) will play a nose technique, which will put more pressure on the team's young linebackers.

16 Falcons Jonathan Babineaux and Montavious Stanley, who began last season as backups, are set to start. Trey Lewis is battling back from knee surgery but had a promising rookie year.

TOP 5

1. Kevin Williams, Vikings
2. Pat Williams, Vikings
3. Tommie Harris, Bears
4. Jovan Haye, Buccaneers
5. Mike Patterson, Eagles

INSIDE THE AFC

A healthy Jackson could catch a break with the Patriots

Chad Jackson, a third-year pro who has been plagued by injuries, has the potential to jump into the Patriots' wide receiver rotation. Jackson is big (6-1, 213) and fast with huge hands and a playmaker mentality. He's battling Kelley Washington for the fourth receiver job now, but there's no reason he can't eventually challenge Jabar Gaffney for the No. 3 spot.

BALTIMORE This is a key season for LE Trevor Pryce, who missed most of last season with injuries. In 2006, he was a strong pass rusher who relied on quickness, leverage and the ability to ward off blockers with his hands. Now he has to prove that pass-rushing drive is still there.

BUFFALO Look for second-year RB Marshawn Lynch to become more of a focus on offense. The young workhorse is physical and has the strength and balance to break tackles and fight for yardage. A prototypical downhill runner, Lynch also has good hands and runs smooth routes.

CINCINNATI With WRs Chad Johnson and T.J. Houshmandzadeh working out on their own, a window of opportunity has opened for veteran Doug Gabriel and rookies Jerome Simpson and Andre Caldwell. Gabriel, who is catching everything thrown his way and developing chemistry with QB Carson Palmer, could go from journeyman to jewel.

CLEVELAND The running game didn't take off last season until Ryan Tucker took over at right guard, and it could sputter this year if Tucker is slow to recover from a broken hip. Tucker, a former right tackle, seems to prefer the inside battles at guard, where he can use his size and power.

DENVER Coaches believe veteran free-agent WR Darrell Jackson, 29, still has 60-catch ability. Jackson doesn't have great speed, but he knows how to find holes in zone coverages and has a nose for the end zone. Only Keary Colbert stands between him and a starting job opposite Brandon Marshall.

HOUSTON LB Zach Diles is thriving in his move from backup in the middle to starter on the strong side. He makes up for a lack of size (6-0, 240) by being very physical. He adds speed to the position and can hold his own against bigger tight ends.

INDIANAPOLIS DE Dwight Freeney (foot) and SS Bob Sanders (shoulder) did not participate in the mandatory minicamp and might not be cleared for the start of training camp, but both expect to be ready for the start of the regular season.

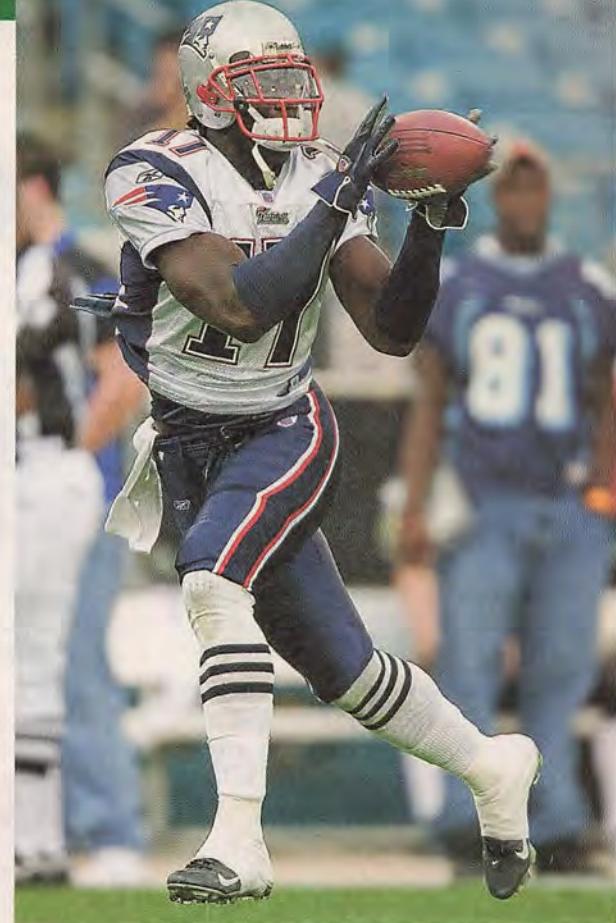
JACKSONVILLE DE Reggie Hayward, who appears to be fully recovered from a torn Achilles' he suffered in 2006, might be the answer to the team's pass-rushing woes. Hayward has demonstrated much-improved mobility and explosiveness in workouts.

KANSAS CITY Rookie OT Branden Albert might get an early call to start on the left side. Albert is agile and moves his feet well enough to handle edge pass rushers. If he does win the job, it will allow Damion McIntosh to move back to his natural right side.

MIAMI Free-agent pickup Steve McKinney is a clear upgrade at guard. McKinney should slide into the left slot, allowing Justin Smiley to switch to his natural spot on the right side. McKinney, a former starting center for the Texans, also will provide veteran guidance for rookie LT Jake Long.

NEW YORK Free-agent OLB Calvin Pace isn't the prototypical edge rusher, but he's good in coverage and against the run. His versatility will allow the Jets to line him up in different spots to confuse opponents.

OAKLAND Veteran DE Greg Spires was signed to be a pass-rush specialist, though he's young enough (33) and talented enough to play more of



Size, speed and hands—plus health—will be key factors in Jackson's quest to move up the Patriots' depth chart.

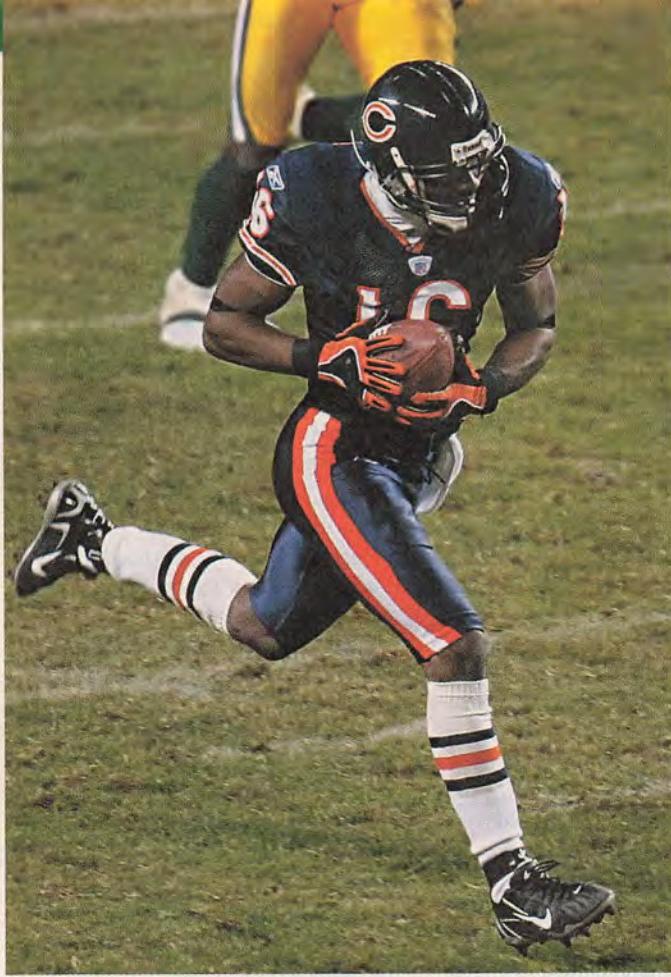
ten. Because Jay Richardson has yet to prove himself as an every-down player, look for Spires to log a lot more time—and record more sacks—than anticipated.

PITTSBURGH WR Willie Reid could have a hard time making the roster with the addition of rookie Limas Sweed. Reid has not developed into a top-tier punt returner and will, at best, be a fifth receiver. He never has regained his quickness after a 2006 ankle injury.

SAN DIEGO ILB Anthony Waters, who spent his rookie season rehabbing his ACL, appears to be the physical player coaches saw glimpses of in limited preseason action. Waters still has much to learn and he won't start right away, but his progress is welcome with Stephen Cooper facing a four-game suspension to start the season.

TENNESSEE S Vincent Fuller is the favorite to win the nickel job, although he'll have competition from CB Eric King and newcomer Chris Carr. Fuller was solid in the role last year, although his tackling got sloppy late—the result of a shoulder injury he suffered in mid-December.

CORRESPONDENTS: Baltimore, Mike Preston; Buffalo, Allen Wilson; Cincinnati, Chick Ludwig; Cleveland, Steve Doerschuk; Denver, Lee Rasizer; Houston, Megan Manfull; Indianapolis, Mike Chappell; Jacksonville, Michael C. Wright; Kansas City, Adam Teicher; Miami, Jeff Darlington; New England, John Tomase; New York, J.P. Pelzman; Oakland, Steve Corkran; Pittsburgh, Gerry Dulac; San Diego, Kevin Acee; Tennessee, Jim Wyatt.



Bradley's recent knee surgery is an unkind cut to the Bears' hopes of putting together a game-breaking passing game.

ARIZONA Second-year WR Steve Breaston has added weight and muscle and is better able to beat press coverage off the line. It appears Breaston, who has the speed to stretch the field, will make a strong bid for the No. 3 job.

ATLANTA Chris Houston is coming off an up-and-down rookie season but will be counted on to hold down the right cornerback spot. He must make better decisions because he could end up defending a lot of No. 1 receivers in man coverage.

CAROLINA Fifth-round pick Gary Barnidge could make a run at the starting tight end job. He's a smooth receiver and can do something with the ball after he catches it. He needs work as a blocker but is adding bulk.

DALLAS The team hopes third-year WR Miles Austin becomes a difference-maker this season. He has spent the offseason working on running routes and being more controlled coming out of his breaks so he can harness his speed and make it a weapon.

CORRESPONDENTS: Arizona, Kent Somers; Atlanta, D. Orlando Ledbetter; Carolina, Darin Gant; Chicago, Brad Biggs; Dallas, Jean-Jacques Taylor; Detroit, Tom Kowalski; Green Bay, Tom Silverstein; Minnesota, Kevin Seifert; New Orleans, Mike Triplett; New York, Paul Schwartz; Philadelphia, Geoff Mosher; St. Louis, Jim Thomas; San Francisco, Matt Barrows; Seattle, Clare Farnsworth; Tampa Bay, Roy Cummings; Washington, Paul Woody.

INSIDE THE NFC

Offseason news at receiver is mostly bad for the Bears

Bears WR Mark Bradley's setback—he had arthroscopic surgery on his right knee in May—gives Brandon Lloyd a clearer path to the starting job opposite Marty Booker. Though Bradley runs well after the catch, Lloyd has the speed to stretch the field vertically. The bottom line: A club that is desperate for playmakers may be without one it thought it could count on.

DETROIT Second-year MLB Buster Davis spent most of last season on the practice squad after being cut by the Cardinals. Though Davis is 5-9, coaches believe his quickness and recognition skills will keep him from getting lost. Rookie Jordon Dizon and Davis will get most of the preseason reps.

Allen Barbre at left guard. Barbre has more athletic ability and explosiveness off the ball, but Colledge is much more refined. Still, Colledge will have to start moving people off the ball to keep Barbre from taking his job.

MINNESOTA RB Maurice Hicks was signed to be a kickoff returner but showed during OTAs he is capable of handling a bigger load if necessary. Hicks could serve a role in passing situations; he has good hands and excellent instincts in the open field.

NEW ORLEANS The Dan Morgan experiment didn't work out—he announced his retirement last week. The team still has Scott Shanle, last year's starter, and veteran backups Mark Simoneau and Troy Evans at weakside linebacker and will count on new MLB Jonathan Vilma to make big plays.

NEW YORK RB Brandon Jacobs' hard-charging style makes him vulnerable to hits, and he must prove he can stay healthy after missing five games last season. He figures to give up some of

the rushing workload to Ahmad Bradshaw, who showed in the playoffs that he can be a major player in the backfield.

PHILADELPHIA The early buzz about rookie SS Quintin Demps is that he's strong in coverage. He was outstanding in man situations in college and is known for getting his hands on the ball. He could push to become a part of the team's nickel set.

ST. LOUIS FB Brian Leonard has added bulk but must work on making quick decisions reading holes as a runner and getting yards after the catch as a receiver. He will serve as the lead blocker for RB Steven Jackson on some plays.

SAN FRANCISCO WR Isaac Bruce set the tone for his younger teammates with a sharp and businesslike minicamp, and WR Bryant Johnson also looked good. The best competition is for the No. 3 spot, where Arnaz Battle, Ashley Lelie and Jason Hill are competing for the job.

SEATTLE Rob Sims wasn't the answer at left guard last season, so he will get the chance to win the starting job on the right side after the offseason addition of LG Mike Wahle. Sims will have to be more consistent but has the mobility new line coach Mike Solari requires from his linemen.

TAMPA BAY LT Luke Petitgout, who missed most of last season with a knee injury, is expected to be ready for training camp and should give Donald Penn a run for the starting job. If the two are even, the team probably will start Petitgout and keep Penn as a reserve swing tackle.

WASHINGTON RT Jon Jansen will not be certain he has recovered fully from an ankle injury he suffered last season until bodies are falling on top of him in preseason games. But during minicamp and OTAs, he moved well, his technique was sound and his hand placement was good.

Underclassmen should feel free to dip a toe in the NBA draft waters. For a lot of them, it's smarter than jumping in with both feet.

The draft is a deal it's OK to back out of

By Mike DeCourcy

decourcy@sportingnews.com



Kansas fans must have enjoyed having Brandon Rush back with the Jayhawks last season. That appeared to work out nicely for everyone but the team's victims.

Those who follow Marquette had to be pleased with getting back Dominic James for not one more year but two. The Golden Eagles would have been somewhat pointless without him.

And though Virginia did not make it back to the NCAA Tournament after Sean Singletary returned to the Grounds, the university retired his jersey, so Cavs fans had to figure that was a fair deal.

Not every underclassman who retreated from the NBA draft and returned for another college season lived quite the same fairy tale, but there were many other happy endings.

Of the 53 active Division I players who entered last year's draft, 27 spent at least part of the season on NBA rosters and 22 returned to com-

James tested his pro prospects but returned to college—and no one got hurt.

pete in college. At its core, the early-entry process produced 92.5 percent positive outcomes. There's not much in basketball that's working quite so well these days.

Which is why it's hard to accept the fact so many coaches are screaming that the draft-testing process is a disaster. "We should have a window that says April 14-21, turn pro or come back," says one major-conference coach who reached the NCAA Tournament last season.

At conference meetings from the ACC at Amelia Island to the Big 12 in Colorado Springs, much of the discussion among coaches was about the burden of waiting for those players who filed for early entry without hiring agents to make their final decisions. The NBA allows underclassmen to withdraw up to 10 days before the draft—which makes this year's big day June 16.

Some want the NBA to move up that deadline, but the league is unlikely to agree because it would reduce the amount of time pro teams have to work out and interview players. Some coaches, stunningly, would choose to render the phrase "testing the waters" obsolete.

I'm all for anything that reduces the number of clichés in America's sports discourse, but it's unseemly for college coaches, making the money they are, to oppose one of the few NCAA rules that benefit athletes.

Players who test the draft process get time and the necessary information to make informed decisions. They can work out for individual teams. They can participate in the predraft camp, which is going on this week in Orlando. This year, for the first time, they can do all this without having to pay a dime; if a team in the NBA wants to see UCLA forward Luc Richard Mbah a Moute, it pays his expenses.

Players already are starting to trickle back toward campus as they discover the NBA is not yet interested. San Diego State's Lorenzo Wade pulled out in mid-May. Texas A&M shooter Josh Carter and Marquette guard Jerel McNeal made their announcements last week. If someone remaining on the list is significantly injured before the withdrawal date, which happened to Rush and former Illinois star Dee Brown, the option to return can be invaluable. If Brown and Rush had been forced to make final decisions with no chance to return, their careers would have been damaged.

Indeed, the players on the early-

entry list might encounter agents providing advice that is neither accurate nor in the players' best interests. But that happens while they're competing in college, too.

Too many coaches seem to be more interested in timely decisions than proper choices. Several of them are spending the better part of two months with significant uncertainty regarding their rosters, and that's hard, but they're being hypocritical in arguing for expedience in this area.

Marquette's James went to the NBA predraft camp after his sophomore season concluded in 2007 and discovered he wasn't as pro-ready as he figured. It was humbling, but he returned to school, delivered an impressive junior year and now will lead the Golden Eagles as a senior. Almost certainly, he will pass George Thompson to become the school's career scoring champ.

James heard from many people that the crush of point guards in the 2008 draft—including Derrick Rose, Jerryd Bayless and O.J. Mayo—made it imperative for him to escape Marquette in 2007. It was a preposterous argument, but James was smart to buy it only on layaway. If he hadn't been offered the option to back out, he might be broke today.

SN



ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

Stan McNeal will be in Orlando, and he'll keep up with all the predraft camp happenings at sportingnews.com.

speedreads

Just because recruit Emmanuel Negedu received a release from his letter of intent with Arizona doesn't mean it's time for Wildcats fans to panic. That moment passed long ago.

Early in the draft process, few considered Kansas State forward Bill Walker a likely first-round pick. That stemmed from conditioning issues lingering from the ACL injury he suffered in December 2006. Walker is addressing that concern by preparing for the draft with famed trainer Tim Grover and could be dazzling in team workouts. He's certainly a first-round talent.

Several elite high school players invited to compete for a spot on the U.S. team for the U-18 FIBA Americas Championship are deciding they'd prefer to represent their country (in Argentina July 14-18) rather than their shoe companies (in July camps and tournaments). I'm sure it was a tough call for many of them.



Johnson led Iowa State in scoring last season, but he's packing his bags anyway.

When Scout.com analyst **Dave Telep** released his final top 100 rankings for the recruiting class of 2008, future Miami SF **DeQuan Jones**

Jones made a huge jump to No. 22. A product of Wheeler High near Atlanta, Jones did not get a lot of exposure last year because a death in the family kept him off the summer circuit for all but one tournament. And in that Las Vegas event, he played mostly in the post for the World Wide Renegades. "He's a big-time wing," says Hurricanes coach **Frank Haith**. "He's the best player we've signed since we've been here, and he may be the best athlete I've ever been around." Jones joins a perimeter already stacked with PG **Jack McClinton**, SG **James Dews**, SF **Brian Asbury** and PG **Lance Hurdle**. > Most in the Iowa State program were shocked by SF **Wesley Johnson**'s decision to transfer after he'd gone through all the procedures to return

>INSIDE DISH

next season—including the team voting him captain. Johnson averaged 12.4 points and was allowed to play on the perimeter last season, which took away some of his rebounding duties and allowed him to focus on refining his skills for a possible pro career. Iowa State didn't rush to issue Johnson a release. > UCLA needed to add C **J'Mison Morgan** regardless of whether Fs **Alfred Aboya** and Luc Richard Mbah a Moute return. Aboya can graduate this summer and pursue other opportunities, and Mbah a Moute is testing the NBA draft process. Both are likely to return, but nothing is certain and the Bruins have already lost senior C **Lorenzo Mata-Real** and freshman All-American PF **Kevin Love**. The only experienced frontcourt player UCLA is certain will return is **James Keefe**. Morgan went looking for a new home after LSU, where he signed in November, changed coaches. With Morgan and fellow freshman **Drew Gordon**, there will be sufficient inside depth to complement a deep perimeter attack. > The New Orleans Privateers are expecting to be back home in Lakefront Arena this summer—for the first time since Hurricane Katrina damaged it in 2005.

Coaches are hoping to be in their offices by late August, and the players would like to be working out in Lakefront by then, too. Being back there should help UNO return to normal—and resume drawing crowds for home games. > When Xavier coach **Sean Miller** spoke to a gathering of college assistants at the recent Villa 7 Consortium at Nike's campus in Beaverton, Ore., he delivered an interesting message about the top priority for new head coaches. He told them their first concern should not be recruiting or gladhanding boosters—but connecting with the players on the current team. It's common for a new coach to make the mistake of looking ahead to the days when "my guys" will fill the roster. That can set a bad tone for a developing program.

Florida State won't fool me again. Don't let any of these teams fool you.

Can you say overrated?

By Matt Hayes

mhayes@sportingnews.com

I'm waiting for the e-mail. Get it every year around this time from a buddy of mine who can't, for the life of him, understand my fascination with Florida State.

Every year I jump into the deep end. Every year he laughs at me while I tread water and the Seminoles sink further into the muck of mediocrity.

The most overrated team in the country, he says. You don't know what the hell you're talking about, I say. And now, the painful revelation: He's right.

Five overrated teams—Florida State isn't in anyone's preseason top 25 but makes the list based on reputation—waiting to be exposed this fall:

Florida State. All you need to know about the 'Noles: They lost badly to Wake Forest the past two seasons. Granted, the Deacs are now among the ACC's elite, but these programs don't recruit in the same hemisphere. Yet if you line up the two teams and we choose for a pickup game, I'm taking Wake players at just about every position.

FSU teams of late play with no heart—just bravado that's gone by the second quarter. You can have the high school All-Americans who talk big and play small. I'll take the guys no one wanted who have everything to prove. FSU had one player—one—last season who played hard every down: wideout Preston Parker. And he went and left a loaded gun under the dashboard of his car.

Hello, mediocrity.

Texas. First, a disclaimer: Considering the depleted numbers on defense last fall, Mack Brown did the best coaching job of his career getting 10 wins out of the Longhorns.

A year later, what do we have? Essentially the same defense and an offense that has no legitimate tailback and no deep threat at wide receiver. And you thought quarterback Colt McCoy regressed last season.

It's a testament to Brown and what he has built that Texas is ranked in the top 10 of nearly every preseason poll. But this team isn't close to top 10-cal-

iber; it'll be lucky to stumble into the Cotton Bowl.

The culprits: Recruits who haven't panned out. Players such as all-world linebacker Sergio Kindle and five-star defensive end Eddie Jones.

Arizona State. Here's an interesting factoid: ASU was Pac-10 co-champion last fall—and didn't beat a team with a pulse. I'm all for reclamation stories, but ASU's turnaround under coach Dennis Erickson was nothing more than a team playing in a watered-down league and still losing its three toughest games of the season (USC, Oregon, Texas).

Now this ASU team must deal with key losses on both sides of the ball. It does have quarterback Rudy Carpenter—but it also has his enigmatic ways. Factor the pluses and minuses and it's not a good combination for a team that is in most everyone's top 15 this spring.

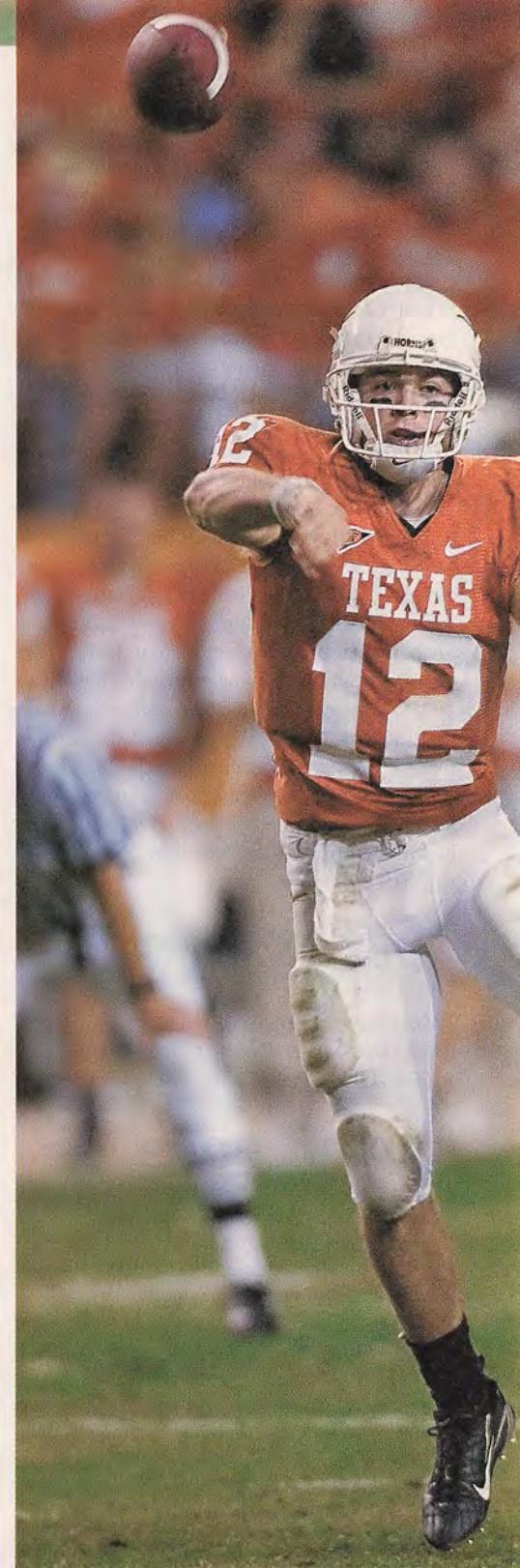
The road map to a meltdown: a little nonconference tilt the third weekend of September against SEC heavyweight Georgia, followed by conference road games against California and USC. Everyone on the train to 6-6ville.

Clemson. The Tigers a top 10 team? I've seen this before. Plug and play, everyone: Woody Dantzler, Charlie Whitehurst, Cullen Harper. Start fast, finish slow; stumble at the start, sprint to the finish. What's the difference? It washes out to seven or so wins and coach Tommy Bowden feeling heat.

The only change this time: Bowden's recent contract extension all but guarantees his safety. I'm not buying Clemson until someone on that staff realizes C.J. Spiller actually plays for the Tigers. One of the game's most dynamic running backs somehow touched the ball just 16.5 times a game (that includes punt and kickoff returns) last season—a monumental increase from the 13.2 in 2006.

Absolutely dumbfounding.

Texas Tech. Kid you not: Heard a television bobblehead the other day say the Red Raiders



are his sleeper pick to make it to a BCS game—and maybe even more.

Tech will score on everyone this fall. There's quarterback Graham Harrell and wideout Michael Crabtree, plus a few other guys who will get 60-70



ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

Matt Hayes ranks the top players by position in the BCS conferences. See who's who in the Big East at sportingnews.com.



McCoy will be hard-pressed to improve without proven talent around him.

catches, too. To this, I say: So?

It's the other side of the ball that has kept Tech from resembling anything close to a Big 12 contender. The defense played well the second half of last season after Ruffin McNeill took over as coordinator but still gave up 127 points to Missouri, Texas and Oklahoma. Those aren't BCS numbers. Those are the numbers of a team waiting to be exposed.

SN

Don't get too excited about Big 12 commissioner **Dan Beebe**'s push for five years of eligibility for college football players. It's rife with questions and potential potholes. Although redshirting would be eliminated and players would have five years to play five years, such a move could lead to more scholarships being revoked before the end of the five-year window. Scholarships are one-year commitments; coaches can revoke—or not reissue—any scholarship to any player at any time. If coaches are selling five years of college on the recruiting trail—a five-year commitment on the roster—the margin for error in recruiting would be significantly reduced. No coach wants a reputation as someone who runs off athletes to free up scholarships, but you better believe it would happen. Add to that the NCAA's new restrictions that limit contact between head coaches and recruits and five years of eligibility doesn't make sense. > Miami already had problems with its tenuous situation at quarterback, but things got worse when the team lost its most promising defensive player for at least four months—and likely well into the season. DE **Allen Bailey**, who dominated spring practice and was one of coach **Randy Shannon**'s first key recruits in the 2007 class, tore a pectoral muscle lifting weights in the off-season conditioning program. The Canes underachieved on the defensive line last fall, and Bailey was moved to end from linebacker to get more athleticism at the spot. He was nearly unblockable in spring scrimmages, even though he still hadn't picked up the nuances of the position. He would have continued the transition in fall camp, but now those lost practices will affect the rest of the season for a player Miami coaches were expecting to make a significant impact. >



Ohio State is looking for ways to get Saine more involved in its offense.

> INSIDE DISH

Ohio State is working on ways to get backup RB **Brandon Saine** more involved in the offense—even playing him and Heisman Trophy candidate RB **Chris Wells** in the same back-

field. The Buckeyes used a similar formation in the national title game with Saine as an offset lead blocker (who didn't do much blocking), but the roles this fall will be more clearly defined. Saine is one of the top five athletes on the team; why waste him on the bench? One intriguing possibility: an occasional spread option formation of freshman QB **Terrelle Pryor**, Wells and Saine. > LB **Manti Te'o** of Honolulu is among the top recruits in the country, and the race to land him is becoming one of long flights and early-morning phone calls. Recruits from Hawaii usually are recruited exclusively by schools on the West Coast, but LSU, Auburn and Notre Dame are actively recruiting Te'o—and are among the leaders to land him. It won't be easy to pull him from USC or UCLA, but Te'o hasn't ruled out playing away from the West Coast.

speedreads

A group of coaches—Charlie Weis, Tommy Tuberville, Randy Shannon, Mark Richt and Jack Siedlecki—went on a goodwill tour of the Middle East last week. Too often we speak of the bad in sports. Here's some good.

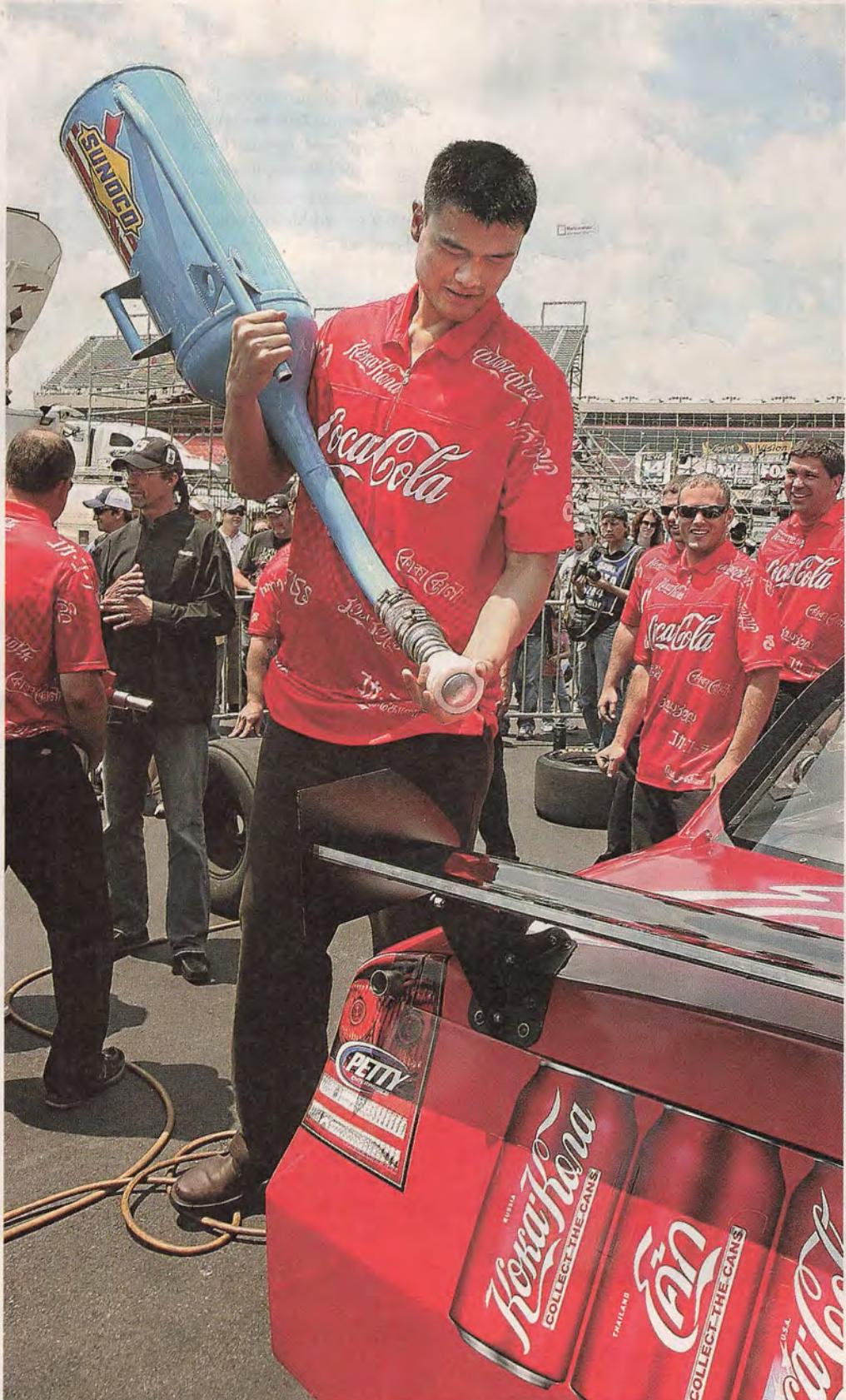
The same week Florida State wideout Preston Parker was handed a two-game suspension for carrying a concealed weapon, school president T.K. Wetherell was speaking at a college football forum and said, "Aren't we supposed to treat (athletes) like the rest of the students?" Here's hoping FSU students aren't driving around campus locked and loaded.

EXPOSURE

A big man with a can-do attitude

Houston Rockets center Yao Ming played gas man as an honorary crew member during a simulated pit stop before Sunday's Coca-Cola 600. With gas at four bucks a gallon, it only makes sense that Kyle Petty's No. 45 would need a guy making \$14 million a year to look after every last drop.

Photo by HAROLD HINSON FOR SN



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